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HASIDISM



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HASIDISM

Popular History of Jewish Civilization

General Editor: Raphael Posner

HASIDISM

Compiled by Aryeh Rubinstein



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INTRODUCTION

The very nature of Judaism, as it had developed by the beginning of the Common Era, was such that it carried within it the seeds of sectarianism. Judaism was an organic growth and no formal creed of belief had been created. Indeed, talmudic Judaism comprises an astonishingly wide array of beliefs and views. *Halakhah* lives together with *aggadah*; national particularism is taught side by side with universalism; some passages indicate a theocentric view of life while others are downright humanistic; certain authorities favored asceticism while others deprecated it; there are rabbis who stressed the cultic and ritual aspects of Judaism, and there are others for whom the social teachings of Judaism seem to be of paramount importance. All these views are within the rabbinic tradition and, as long as their advocates did not negate any of the few basic teachings and remained within the relatively wide framework of *halakhah*, are perfectly legitimate.

It is only natural, therefore, that groups should develop which would stress one particular teaching as their main doctrine. And in fact throughout the ages many such groups have arisen, only to disappear. Some of them asserted their distinctive stand, but ultimately sank back into the general body of Judaism. Others became so sectarian as to write themselves out of Judaism, either as new religions or as adjuncts to other religions.

The outstanding example of a doctrine that has at once maintained its individuality and has remained within the Jewish pale is Hasidism. The sheer vitality with which it started, and the relatively short time it took to become a major ingredient in European Jewry indicate the real need it must have filled. Even if there was a period of relative relapse after Hasidism's initial rise, it seems to have been able to renew itself and today is, if any-

thing, on the rise and, amazingly enough, is making a strong appeal to disillusioned modern youth.

Perhaps the strength of Hasidism is the fact that it deals with the human being and is, therefore, a very real teaching. It seems to understand the needs of the person as opposed to the needs of the law or of theology. Menahem Mendel of Kotsk is reported to have explained the Hasid's apparent disregard for the strict statutory times of prayer by saying that "in Kotsk we have a soul, not a clock." If we may take this *bon mot* further, perhaps we could say that Hasidism's main teaching is that "we have a soul, not a book." It could be that it is that very "humanity" which makes Hasidism so appealing, particularly in this age of alienation.

Be that as it may, there is no doubt that Hasidism succeeded. Notwithstanding the original opposition to it, and some of its own early excesses, Hasidism has maintained its own individuality while remaining firmly set within traditional Judaism. This fact alone makes it a subject worth studying, quite apart from the insights that we may gain from its study. This book does not purport to be a full history of Hasidism nor an exhaustive account of its doctrines. It does hope to give the reader a taste of Hasidism — the flavor, however faint, of the movement which swept Eastern Europe and which may have something to say even today. Its doctrine of joy and *devekut* do so much to make everybody feel that he is somebody. Its teaching that even the most lowly of men is able to communicate with the Almighty, and that all of us have what God desires, is perhaps one of the most comforting ideas a person can contemplate.

The signature of Israel ben Eliezer
Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of
modern Hasidism.

ישראל בן אליעזר

1. IN THE WAKE OF SHABBETAI ZEVI

Even if Hasidism had passed into the limbo of history, this pietist-mystical-revivalist movement would be of intense interest to the student of Judaism. Apart from the tremendous impact it has had on Jewish life, Hasidism has also influenced modern Christian theology. But Hasidism is not only still alive today, it is even experiencing a resurgence that few would have predicted even 50 years ago.

Some Questions About Hasidism

Hasidism has been described as “the rebellion of the half-illiterate rural Jew against the supremacy of the learned urban Jew.” Like many thumb-nail characterizations, however, this is something of an over-simplification of a problem which students of Hasidism are still debating. What is the essence of Hasidism — was it primarily a religious movement or a social one? What relation did it bear to the messianic movement of Shabbetai Zevi, the failure of which had left a gaping wound in the soul of Polish Jewry? Why did the movement come into being when it did?

There are no easy answers to these questions.

But first a word about the name. In rabbinic literature the term *hasidim* (singular, *hasid*) is used to designate pious Jews who maintained a higher standard than most in observing the religious and moral commandments. Although the image of the *hasid* was not identical at all times and in all circles, what was common to all religious types to whom the name was applied was a divergence from conventional behavior and the normal standard. Thus the early *hasidim* (*hasidim ha-rishonim*) referred to in the Mishnah would wait an hour before praying in order to direct their hearts to God. Later the term was applied to persons who evinced ideal and exemplary behavior in some sphere of life. In the Ethics of the Fathers, for example, he who says “what is

*About the
Name*

mine is yours and what is yours is yours" is called a *hasid*, and so is "he whom it is hard to provoke and easy to pacify." In medieval Germany a movement emerged known as *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, whose adherents assumed religious duties more severe than the accepted ones. They demanded of themselves the utmost purification of soul and thought and scrupulous observance even of minor precepts.

The movement we are concerned with in these pages, however, had its beginnings in the regions of Podolia and Volhynia in Poland in the 1730s and 1740s with the appearance of individuals and small groups of pietists who called themselves *Hasidim*. These were bleak times – even bleaker than usual – for Polish Jewry. The Cossack revolt and massacres under Chmielnicki in 1648-49, the Tatar incursions from Crimea, and the subsequent war with Moscow combined with the Swedish war to bring on the Jews of Poland-Lithuania three decades of bloodshed, destruction and suffering. Thousands were killed,

Bleak Times in Poland



The *bet ha-midrash* of the Ba'al Shem Tov in Medzibezh, Podolia, on a postage stamp issued by the Israel Post Office in 1960 to commemorate the bicentenary of his death.

thousands were forced to embrace Christianity, and thousands fled westward. The institutions and activities of the Jewish communities lost their dynamism; inertia set in. Much that had been full of imminent promise of development before the disasters now tended to petrify. Then, before they had recovered from these blows, the Jewish communities were beset by a new one: the raids and massacres by the Haidamacks, paramilitary bands consisting mainly of peasant serfs turned brigands, who found the Jews a convenient and defenseless target, and one that could be attacked with the blessing of the Russian Orthodox priests. "Is there no end to this bitter exile?" cried a contemporary rabbi.

In the social and economic decline that followed, the intellectual level of the Jewish masses sank lower and lower. Talmudic learning, formerly widespread, now became the possession of a narrow circle of scholars, while the lower classes stagnated in ignorance and superstition.

This dichotomy between the leadership and the people was one of the main themes of the first Hasidic book, *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef* (1780), by Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye. Its scathing denunciation of the aloofness and arrogance of some of the rabbis and scholars adds another dimension to the background out of which Hasidism developed. Rabbi Jacob Joseph found that pride and vanity were very common among the learned. Their sermons, which should have shown the people the path they should follow, were mainly used to display their brilliance. Too many scholars were overly fond of money, a sin which led them to flatter the rich. They permitted the members of the ruling class to act as it pleased so long as their own positions were secure. They felt little obligation towards the people, towards whom their attitude was often one of contempt. All this brought about the condition of *penud*, radical separation between the learned class and the people, and this, Rabbi Jacob Joseph considered the greatest tragedy of his age.

*The Rabbis
Denounced*

Messianic Fervor Persists

But even more important than the social-communal crisis as a factor that paved the way for the rise of Hasidism was the religious crisis: the tense messianic fervor that persisted long after the bankruptcy of Shabbateanism. Shabbetai Zevi (1627-76) had aroused feverish messianic expectations among Jewish communities in Turkey, Italy and Poland, after proclaiming himself as the Messiah in May 1665, while on a visit to Palestine. In Smyrna, Turkey, Shabbetai Zevi pronounced the Ineffable Name, decreed the abolition of the fast of the Tenth of Tevet, and is said to have promised to free women from the "curse of Eve." On the eve of Passover in 1666 he sacrificed a Passover lamb and roasted it with its fat, inducing his companions to eat this forbidden food and reciting over it the blessing, "He who permits the forbidden." Many of his followers sold their houses and other property to provide themselves with money for the journey to the Holy Land; others made no such preparations, being convinced that they would be transported on clouds. As the fasts of the 17th of Tammuz and the Ninth of Av approached, he not only proclaimed the fasts abolished but introduced new festivals in their stead. The 17th of Tammuz became the "day of the revival of Shabbetai Zevi's spirit" and the Ninth of Av the festival of his birthday. Before long, the Turkish authorities became alarmed by Shabbetai Zevi's messianic pretensions and activities, and they gave him the choice of being put to death immediately or converting to Islam. He chose the latter alternative.

*Shabbetai Zevi's
Apostasy*

Although his apostasy produced a profound shock in Jewry, it did not bring the movement to an abrupt end. Rather than admit that their redeemer was an imposter, many of Shabbetai Zevi's followers clung to their belief and sought an explanation of what had happened. That so many refused to give up their faith in Shabbetai Zevi even now only shows how deeply rooted the movement was.

Nathan of Gaza, Shabbetai Zevi's "prophet," proved equal to *Nathan of Gaza*

the new challenge. He came up with a theological explanation of the master's apostasy. This, he argued, was actually the fulfillment of a mission to lift up the holy sparks (see page 20) which were dispersed even among the gentiles and concentrated now in Islam. Only the Messiah could redeem these sparks: he was acting like a spy sent into the enemy camp. By placing the paradox of an apostate Messiah, a tragic but still legitimate redeemer, at the center of the new, developing Shabbatean theology, Nathan laid the foundations for the ideology of the believers for the next 100 years.



Roman Vishniac's picture of an elderly Hasid, taken in Cracow in 1938.



Caricature of Polish Hasidic couple. After L. Hollaenderski *Les Israelites de Pologne*, 1846.

Ten years after his conversion, Shabbetai Zevi died quite suddenly, on the Day of Atonement, at the age of 50. But even with his death Shabbateanism did not come to an end. Shabbatean groups continued to be active, and various prophets and claimants to the succession appeared. Many believers proclaimed 1706 as the year of Shabbetai Zevi's second advent, and the hundreds of Jews who emigrated to the Land of Israel with Rabbi Judah Hasid in 1700 probably were Shabbateans who intended there to await the arrival of the Messiah. And it is not without significance that the regions where Hasidism made its first appearance – Podolia and Volhynia – were those where Shabbateanism had found its strongest following.

One of Judah Hasid's collaborators was Hayyim Malakh, who propagated the teachings of Nathan of Gaza among the rabbis of Poland. Malakh later became a spokesman for a radical branch of Shabbateanism, and he spread the gospel of secret antinomianism in Podolia, where he found fertile ground, especially in the smaller communities. The antinomian slogan propagated by the radical wing was that "the nullification of the Torah is its true fulfillment." Like the grain that dies in the earth, it was said, the deeds of man must become in some way "rotten" in order to bring forth the fruit of redemption. Some radical groups, especially in Podolia, performed secret rituals. The eating of forbidden fat (*helev*) or severe transgressions of sexual prohibitions were initiation rites. Not surprisingly, these doctrines and practices alarmed the rabbinic authorities, who considered the children of these sectarians as *mamzerim*, i.e., barred from admission to the Jewish fold.

Secret Rituals

On the other hand, there is evidence that not a few of the most influential moral preachers and authors of an ethical, ascetic bent were secretly moderate Shabbateans. Even the famous talmudic scholar, Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschuetz (c. 1690-1764) was suspected of Shabbatean leanings and a great uproar ensued, engulfing rabbinic circles in Germany, Austria and Poland in a

Shabbateans Go Underground

heated controversy. The Orthodox were deeply shocked by the possibility that an outstanding rabbi might have leanings towards heretical ideas, and they became more apprehensive than ever regarding the entrenchment of the Shabbateans in many communities. The atmosphere of persecution that prevailed, from about 1725 led the remaining Shabbateans to go completely underground for the next 30 years, especially in Poland.

Where Hasidism Differed

The circles in Poland known as *hasidim* before the advent of the Ba'al Shem Tov, which practiced extreme forms of ascetic piety, contained a strong element of Shabbateanism. Indeed, Gershom Scholem sees Shabbateanism and Hasidism as successive stages in the development of Jewish mysticism. Like Shabbateanism, early Hasidism was based largely on Kabbalism, particularly on "practical" Kabbalism. But it differed from its predecessors in that it "neutralized" their messianic element. It was an attempt "to preserve those elements of Kabbalism which were capable of evoking a popular response, but stripped of their Messianic flavor." Scholem does not suggest that Hasidism dropped the messianic hope; all that he says is that it did not make this the focus of religious life and thought.

Preoccupation with messianism was replaced by emphasis on the personal: it is this that constitutes the originality of Hasidism as against the earlier trends in Jewish mysticism. The salvation of the soul of the individual must precede the redemption of the world. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, forbade (despite the Kabbalistic terminology he frequently employed) any attempt at magical activity designed to hasten the "End of Days." His attitude is clearly seen in a letter to his brother-in-law, Abraham Gershon, in 1751, in which he describes a conversation he had with the Messiah during a spiritual ascent on Rosh Ha-Shanah, 1747: "I asked the Messiah, 'When will you come, master,' and he answered me, 'When your learning will be made

*Individual
Salvation
Comes First*

known and revealed to the world and its source will spread, and all can recite *yihudim* and experience spiritual ascent as you can’ ” This he understood to mean that the advent of the

Another of Roman Vishniac's photographs of Hasidic life in pre-war Poland.



Messiah was still a long way off: “And I was astonished and deeply grieved by this, and wondered when this would come to pass.” Though expressing his deep messianic faith and strong messianic longings, this attitude is far removed from the mystical messianism of Shabbetai Zevi that had proved so destructive shortly before.

2. BRINGING HEAVEN DOWN TO EARTH

Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, Hasidism's first teacher and exemplary saint, was born around 1700 in Okop, a small town in Podolia, to poor and elderly parents in the hard times just described. (Ba'al Shem Tov means "the Master of the Good Name," an appellation later bestowed on Israel because of his purported power to perform miraculous cures and feats by invoking the name of God. He is also known as the "Besht," an acronym formed from the initial letters of Ba'al Shem Tov.) Orphaned as a child, he was educated by the community, of which his father Eliezer had been an honored member. But he often escaped from the dark *lieder* to seek solitude in the woods. At the age of 12 he became a helper to a schoolmaster, gathering the children from their homes in the morning and taking them back in the evening. On the way he taught them the synagogue hymns, which they sang with such enthusiasm that they penetrated the heavens. A jealous Satan thereupon assumed the shape of a werewolf, and put the children to flight. Fearing for their children's lives, their mothers refused to send them to school the next day, but Israel, remembering his father's last words — that he should fear no one but God — begged for another chance. And when the werewolf appeared a second time, he routed him with a club.

When he was 14, Israel became a *shammash* (beadle) at the *bet midrash*. He gained a reputation for laziness by dozing about the building all day long. But in the stillness of the night, unobserved, he pored over the *Zohar*. According to tradition, in his twenties, Israel went into isolation in the Carpathian Mountains in preparation for his future tasks, accompanied by his wife, Hannah. Their life was one of great privation; for several years he eked out a living by digging lime, which his wife sold in town. But here he learned the language of the beasts and the birds, of the plants and trees. From the peasant women he learned the healing properties of grasses and herbs. He learned to cure the

*The Master of
the Good Name*

*Alone in the
Mountains*

Atarah (neckpiece) of a *tallit* believed to have belonged to the Ba'al Shem Tov, preserved by a descendant of Reb Nahman of Bratslav.



sick, to drive out evil spirits and to write amulets.

The Besht Acquires Followers

In the mid-1730s – Hasidic tradition fixes it on his 36th birthday – Israel revealed himself as a healer and leader. The circle of his followers and admirers widened rapidly. Many were drawn by his magnetism and widespread reports of his miracles, and several groups of Hasidim which had formed earlier came under his influence and accepted his leadership to a greater or lesser degree. Tradition hints that some of the members of these Hasidic circles were at first repelled by the Ba'al Shem Tov's activity as miracle healer, although he himself was apparently proud of this work.



Painting by the Australian artist Chaim (Hyman) Gorr (1951) of Hasidim immersed in prayer; their approach to God is the ecstatic and mystical one of the Ba'al Shem Tov.

The Ba'al Shem Tov was addicted to his pipe and the smoking of a pipe later became a kind of ritual among the early Hasidic rabbis and was a target of constant ridicule by opponents of the sect.

The Ba'al Shem Tov for many years planned to go to Palestine, and once he actually set out on the journey but felt impelled to return. Nine years before his death he wrote to his brother-in-law, Abraham Gershon of Kutow, "God knows that I do not despair of traveling to Erez Israel; however, the time is not right." The Besht's unfulfilled desire became an aim for his followers and in succeeding generations, large organized groups of Hasidim made their way to the Holy Land, and made important contributions to the resettlement of the country. *Erez Israel*

The Ba'al Shem Tov undertook journeys to expel demons and evil spirits, and to win influence. In eulogistic folktales, in the tradition handed down by his pupils, and also in writings hostile to him, the interdependence of his healing work and the charisma of his leadership is clearly apparent. Later Hasidic tradition, however, tried to depreciate the importance of these healing and magical practices. In tales about him as well as through his teachings, the Ba'al Shem Tov's great personal charm, remarkable magnetism and ecstatic personality are revealed. *Healing and Magic*

Legends About the Besht

Composed even during his lifetime, the legends about the Ba'al Shem Tov's miracles became an integral part of the Hasidic atmosphere; they both increased his followers' admiration for him and antagonized his opponents. They have also distorted the Besht's historical character. Disciples who had come in contact with him were among the first to assert his supernatural qualities, but even people who were not among his close associates also spoke of his charismatic personality. There thus developed a literature of *shevaḥim* ("praises"), the first anthology of such legends being *Shivḥei ha-Besht*, published in 1814. It contains

about 230 stories with a variety of motifs. They portray the Ba'al Shem Tov as healing the sick, exorcising demons, and resuscitating a child. By opening the *Zohar* the Besht is able to tell a



Graphic representation of the kabbalistic doctrine of the ten *sefirot* (emanations) of God from *Emek Hamelekh* by Naftali Herz ben Jacob Elhanan, Amsterdam, 1648.

distraught father that his son will soon return from a business trip from which he was overdue. Once, when the Besht is pulling a wagon of flour home for the baking of *mazzot* for Passover (his horse having died on the way) and, exhausted, cries aloud to God, the Prophet Elijah appears to him and assures him that all will be well. There are some striking parallels to gospel mythology, such as the story that relates that although the Besht was

not intimate with his wife for 14 years his son Hershele was born during this time by the word of God. Some of the stories tell that the Ba'al Shem Tov could detect the Angel of Death hovering about a person. The following is one of these, and it will also serve as an example of the legends as a whole:

A tax farmer who had bad luck came to the Besht. The Besht saw the Angel of Death dancing behind him. He strongly warned him to repent of his sins: "Why do you pursue the affairs of this world? It would be better for you to repent and correct your ways."

The man suspected that the Besht wanted some money. He offered him some coins, but the Besht refused to take them. When the tax farmer left, the Besht said "The fool, He will die today or tomorrow, and he worries about his luck."

His brother-in-law, the rabbi, our teacher, Rabbi Gershon, scolded him and said: "Why did you speak evil against a Jew?"

He answered him: "What can I do about it if you are blind and did not see the Angel of Death following behind him?"

At that time, the brother-in-law of the Besht, our rabbi and teacher, Jacob, was a widower, and he went on a journey to be remarried. He was accompanied by this same tax farmer, since both of them had to go the same way.

They slept overnight at an inn. The tax farmer ordered a fine dinner. Rabbi Jacob did not want to eat meat, and they gave him dairy food at the end of the table. The tax farmer mocked him. Afterwards they went to sleep. During the night the tax farmer awoke with a severe headache and he cried

out. He asked that someone say the rite of confession with him.

Rabbi Jacob said the prayer and the tax farmer recited the confession after him. In a little while he was dead.

Then Rabbi Jacob returned home to tell that indeed we are blind.

Despite its imaginary legendary character, *Shivhei ha-Besht* includes undoubtedly reliable traditions, and many of the historical events recalled are confirmed in non-Hasidic sources. But even Hasidim had reservations about the work, especially the



"Hasidic Dance," woodcut by Jakob Steinhardt (1961).

strange stories that aroused the scorn of the Mitnaggedim and Maskilim, who used it as a weapon in their war against Hasidism.

Ecstatic Prayer

Prayer was the Ba'al Shem 'Tov's main ecstatic and mystic approach to God; intellectual study and learning took a secondary place. In especially exciting moments he reached a state of mystical exaltation – *aliyyat neshamah* – of which he gave detailed descriptions. Future events and past personalities, both good and evil were shown to him in dreams. But many of his dreams and visions are related to the actual problems and sufferings of the Jews in his generation. In traditional tales he is portrayed as engaged in conversation, and in meeting with people, including women, individually or in small groups. He is never described as preaching in a synagogue. The Besht's teachings do not reveal any talmudic scholarship, and his opponents criticized him for lacking such erudition and for his preoccupation with healing, writing amulets and his conversing with simple men. David of Makow (died 1814), one of the most noted polemicists against early Hasidism, considered him a quack who told fortunes for monetary compensation.

One of the Besht's principal teachings was that prayer is acceptable to God only if it flows from a joyous heart. In fact, he maintained, devotional joy is the proper attitude of the Jew every moment of his life, and not during prayer alone. The Ba'al Shem Tov exemplified these views through his own attitude to life and his own mode of prayer. His admirers told especially of the light and fire that seemed to emanate from him, and of the fiery way in which he recited his prayers. Even more than his teachings, Israel's idealized personality became the inspiration for the life and aspirations of the Hasidim down to the present day.

The Ba'al Shem Tov was aware of his special mission and his charismatic qualities. "I swear to you," he once told his grandson, Moses Hayyim Ephraim of Sodylkow, "that there is one

*Importance of
Joy*



"Hasidim Dancing" by Chanoch Lieberman (1952). The Ba'al Shem Tov taught that prayer is acceptable only when it flows from a joyous heart, and Hasidim frequently express their joy through song and dance.

man in the world who hears Torah from God and the *Shekhinah*, and not from an angel or a seraph." Yet he feared failure, as is clear from the continuation of the above statement: "But he is not convinced that he will not be pushed aside by God, for he can easily be plummeted into the abyss of evil."

The Doctrine of Devekut

At the core of the Ba'al Shem Tov's teaching is the principle of *devekut* ("adhesion," "cleaving") although for him the term had far greater emotional content than in its earlier Kabbalistic usage. Declaring that "faith is the adhesion of the soul to God," he demanded that *devekut* be present in all daily acts. Man must worship God and cleave to Him not only when practicing religious acts and holy deeds, but also in his daily affairs, in his business, and in social contacts, for when a "man is occupied with material needs, yet his thought cleaves to God, he will be blessed."

Since the possibilities of achieving *devekut* were so widespread, there was no need to withdraw from worldly life or to stand aloof from society. Indeed, the Ba'al Shem Tov not only emphasized the element of joy in the worship of God, but he vigorously opposed fasts and asceticism, and he even advised rabbis and preachers not to resort to harsh admonition. He warned Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye "lest he bring himself to the danger of many fasts, which contribute to melancholy and sadness." According to the Ba'al Shem Tov, physical pleasure can give rise to spiritual pleasure, i.e., *devekut*. A physical act can be considered a religious act if the person performing it intends to worship God and the act is performed in a state of *devekut*. For the Ba'al Shem Tov as well as his disciples, *devekut* – especially during prayer – would often assume a decidedly ecstatic character.

*Opposed
Asceticism*

Through prayer, the Ba'al Shem Tov taught, man can attain *devekut*, and make contact with the divine worlds. The way to

devekut in prayer (as in the study of Torah) is through concentration on the mystical meaning of the letters. However, prayer that directs man to the attainment of *devekut* is at times disturbed by “alien thoughts” (*ma’hashavot zarot*), and he who prays must deal with these properly, so that they do not frustrate his spiritual efforts. The Ba’al Shem Tov’s particular way of dealing with “alien thoughts” came to be called “the wisdom of the Besht” and led Rabbi Nahman of Horodenka to recognize his authority and join his group. *Alien Thoughts*

Alien thoughts were derived from a heavenly source and were understood by the Ba’al Shem Tov to be the result of cosmic processes generally associated with the doctrine of the fallen holysparks (*nitzotzot*) in Lurianic Kabbalah. These sparks of divine light are hidden in the extraneous (“sinful”) thoughts and aspire to rise and be redeemed. This thrust conveys the undesirable thought to the human heart. He who sublimates the extraneous thought helps the spark return to its divine source (see page 36). Some alien thoughts must be sublimated and corrected; others must be repelled and removed. “If a man wishes to know how to distinguish between a thought to be repelled and one to be sublimated, he should contemplate whether correction to the thought entered his mind together with the extraneous thought, in which case he should seek to bring it close to him and sublimate it; but if he cannot immediately correct this thought then he must remove it.” *Holy Sparks*

From the areas of Podolia and Volhynia where he was active, the Ba’al Shem Tov’s reputation spread even to circles unconnected with his religious leadership. That his activity also aroused opposition is evident from the legends about him and is hinted at in some of his parables. Rabbi Hayyim ha-Kohen Rappaport of Lvov warned his relatives in Buchach not to turn to “the witch doctor who calls himself Ba’al Shem.” *A Witch Doctor?*

The Ba’al Shem Tov did not put his teachings in writing and he even opposed the attempts of others to do so. But twenty



Hasidic women dancing, a charcoal sketch by Tully Filmus.

years after his death in 1760, his disciple Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, presented in three of his own works hundreds of sermons and homilies that he had heard from the Ba'al Shem Tov. Other disciples, and their disciples, included in their works statements that they had heard from him or which had been cited in his name.

It is extremely difficult to disentangle fact from legend in studying the life and work of the Ba'al Shem Tov, but the message of the movement he founded is clear: simple faith is superior to scholasticism untouched with fervor, joy is to be invoked in God's service, and there are "holy sparks" in all things to be redeemed by a life of sanctity. The Besht, says Abraham Joshua Heschel, "brought Heaven down to earth. He and his disciples, the Hasidim, banished melancholy from the soul and uncovered the ineffable delight of being a Jew."

*Fact and
Legend*

3. HASIDISM BECOMES A MOVEMENT

Although Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye – the first theoretician of Hasidism – was the more senior disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the latter passed the mantle of leadership on to Dov Baer, the "Maggid" ("Preacher") of Mezhirech (died 1772).

The Maggid of Mezhirech

An erudite talmudic scholar, Dov Baer also made a profound study of the Kabbalah, and at first he adopted an ascetic way of life. The mortifications to which he subjected himself before he embraced Hasidism eventually made him ill; he contracted a disease which affected his legs and confined him to his bed. Tradition relates that he sought a cure from the Ba'al Shem Tov, whose reputation as a healer was widespread, after which he became one of his foremost disciples. Dov Baer's conversion to Hasidism was an event of the utmost importance for the new



Joy among Hasidim, captured by Tully Filmus.

sect. Whereas during the life of the Ba'al Shem Tov the chief adherents of Hasidism were drawn from the lower classes of society, the Maggid succeeded in attracting some of the most learned scholars of the day. And they, in turn, directed their efforts mainly to winning over the educated circles of the Jews, though the uneducated were by no means excluded. Unlike the Ba'al Shem Tov, Dov Baer was not a man of the people, and his illness made it difficult for him to associate with his disciples. He too possessed charismatic qualities, however, and was an eloquent preacher and teacher. He was highly esteemed by his disciples, who not only derived spiritual sustenance from his teachings and utterances but also divined an inner significance in his daily life.

*Attracts the
Scholars*

"I did not go to the Maggid of Mezhirech to learn interpretations of the Torah from him," said Aryeh Leib Sarahs (1730-91), "but to note his way of tying his shoelaces and taking off his shoes. For of what worth are the meanings given to the Torah, after all? In his actions, in his speech, in his bearing, and in his fealty to the Lord, man must make the Torah manifest."

Dov Baer transferred the center of Hasidism from Podolia in southeast Poland to Volhynia in the center, and this facilitated its spread throughout the country. From the Maggid's court, missionaries went forth who were successful in attracting many scholars to Hasidism and sending them to the master at Mezhirech to absorb his teaching. From the new center in Volhynia, Hasidism thus spread northward into Belorussia and



Studying Talmud. The Ba'al Shem Tov had stressed ecstasy; when Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezhirech, turned to Hasidism, the emphasis on study and learning was restored.



Two distinct facial expressions have been captured in these oil paintings by Isidor Kaufmann (1853-1921). The pensive face above is that of "An East European Jewess," while a somber awe rests on the features of the "Old Jew with Torah." The loose white gown or *kitel* that he wears under his *tallit* indicates that it is probably the Day of Atonement.





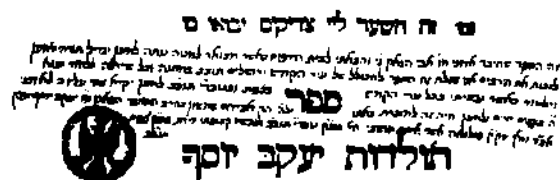
The legal arguments of the Talmud are commonly debated by pairs of scholars or in small groups. "Study," an oil painting by Leopold Pilichowski (1869-1933), shows a Hasidic sage endeavoring to convince a colleague of his interpretation of one of the points of the Law.

Lithuania and westward into Galicia, and it took root in central Poland; more, it succeeded in penetrating the center of the opposition, Vilna. Many local Hasidic leaders became influential as communal leaders and local rabbis. Dov Baer's activity may be considered the beginning of Hasidism as a movement while his personal conduct set the precedent in Hasidism for the institution of the zaddik, or saintly leader. He enjoyed respect and authority outside his own community, and his reputation as a Talmudist led many Jews to turn to him with questions of civil law. *Even in Vilna*

A disciple gave this account of the Great Maggid : "When we journeyed to him, most of our desires were stilled upon entering town. Whoever had a particularly keen desire was soothed upon entering the Maggid's house. But if there was one among us whose soul was still rocking like a boat, when he beheld the Maggid's face he came to rest."

Though by and large Dov Baer adopted the Lurianic Kabbalah, he did not accept the Lurianic dualism which accentuates the extremes of evil and good; for him there is no absolute evil but only degrees of good. "Sin contains repentance," he said, "as the olive contains the oil. At the hour of thy repentance and of thy turning away from sin, the sparks of divine splendor that were in it are raised to the heavenly regions." *No Absolute Evil*

Humility is counted by the Hasidim as one of the chief virtues, and Dov Baer took pains to inculcate it in his disciples. One Hasidic tale relates that before the Maggid began to teach the two brothers, Shmelke and Pinhas, he told them how to conduct themselves throughout the day, from the moment of waking to falling asleep. His directions took into account all their habits, confirming them or modifying them, as though he knew the whole of their lives. In closing he said: "And before you lie down at night, you add up everything you have done during the day. And when a man calculates his hours and sees that he has not wasted a moment in idleness, when his heart beats high with *Pride and Humility*



הוא חסידו של רבי יוסף קארו
 מדרד יעקב יוסף חסיד
 חסיד יעקב יוסף חסיד
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הוא חסידו של רבי יוסף קארו
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 חסיד יעקב יוסף חסיד

Title page of *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*, by Jacob Joseph, Hasidism's first theoretician. It contains the basic teachings of Hasidism, including some the author heard from the Ba'al Shem Tov.

pride, then – up in Heaven – they take all his good works, crush them into a ball, and hurl it down into the abyss.”

In the Maggid's later years, Hasidism aroused fierce opposition on the part of many rabbis. Especial targets of their hostility were the new movement's ecstatic mode of religious worship, the changes introduced in the prayer ritual and the neglect of Torah study by the youth who abandoned the yeshivot and flocked to Mezhirech. Eventually a ban of excommunication was pronounced on Hasidism in Vilna the stronghold of the Mitnaggedim.

Tradition has it that the excommunication affected Dov Baer's health and he died shortly afterward.

Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye

Dov Baer's missionary activity on behalf of Hasidism was complemented by the literary activity of his contemporary, Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye (died c. 1782). When Jacob Joseph came under the influence of the Ba'al Shem Tov in 1741 he was rabbi of Shargorod, the second largest community of Podolia. His Hasidic leanings embroiled him in a controversy with his community, as a result of which he was expelled from Shargorod around 1748. His failure to succeed the Ba'al Shem Tov in the leadership of the Hasidic movement is said to have embittered him.

Polish children at the beginning of the 19th century. After J.P. Norblin *Collections de Costumes Polonaises*, 1817.





Group of Hasidic boys in Cracow, Poland. The casquettes they are wearing was the standard form of headcovering for Hasidic children.

We have already referred to Jacob Joseph's first and principal work, *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*. This contains homilies of the author as well as "words that I heard from my teacher," i.e., the Ba'al Shem Tov. It is the first work to express the basic teachings of Hasidism, both in a positive formulation as well as in the bitter criticism it contains of the traditional Jewish leadership and its scale of values. The publication of *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef* aroused the wrath of the Mitnaggedim, and copies of it were apparently burned in Brody. The homilies of Jacob Joseph reveal him as leader of a community, as well as a penetrating and incisive theoretician and social critic.

The 'Toledot'
Raises a Storm

The presence of God is manifest everywhere and in each and every human thought, Jacob Joseph taught. Even "when man is engaged in prayer and an alien and evil thought enters his mind, it has come to man so that he may improve and uplift it. If he does not believe in this then his acceptance of the rule of the Kingdom of Heaven is defective because, Heaven forbid, he thereby restricts His presence." The ultimate purpose of man is "Thou shalt cleave to Him." This adhesion is only possible through joy; fasting and self-affliction bring sorrow, and sorrow is the root of all evil. Prayers should be recited with a purified and concentrated mind and with joy.

*Sorrow the
Root of
All Evil*

This, however, was only after Jacob Joseph came under the influence of the Ba'al Shem Tov. Before that, like Dov Baer, he had practiced asceticism, fasting every day until nightfall and for one week a month, until midnight. But the Ba'al Shem Tov ordered him to stop, "for this way is dark and bitter and leads to depression and melancholy. The glory of God does not dwell where there is depression but where the joy in performing His *mitzvah* prevails."

Decentralization of Leadership

After the death of the great Maggid, Hasidism remained without a single leader commanding the same authority and general support from all Hasidim, and the leadership was assumed by a number of his disciples. It was in this third generation of the movement (c. 1773-1815) that the basic pattern of Hasidic leadership and succession emerged. There were a number of factors that contributed to the decentralization of leadership in the Hasidic world and consequently to an evergrowing diversification in Hasidic thought and in the Hasidic way of life: the spread and growth of Hasidism, the diversified and illustrious leadership of charismatic individuals who became heads of local centers, each developing his own style of teaching and interpreting the Hasidic way of life, the breakup of former lines of communication and of

*Diversity of
Style*

cultural ties caused by the partitions of Poland-Lithuania (1772, 1793 and 1795), and finally the pressures brought to bear on Hasidic communities by the struggle against the movement. From this generation onward there were always a number of contemporaneous leaders, each claiming the allegiance of his followers. For the most part, both leadership and allegiance were handed down from generation to generation and thus there arose both the dynasties of Hasidic *zaddikim* and the hereditary camps of their followers. At times the living charismatic force asserted itself anew, as in the case of Jacob Isaac, the "Seer" of Lublin, who began to lead a community during the lifetime of his master, Elimelech of Lyzhansk, without his blessing, and of Jacob Isaac of Przysucha, the Seer's disciple, who led a community in the lifetime of his master, though without leaving him.

In this third generation, the new pattern of leadership assured the victory of Hasidism over its opponents and its increasing spread throughout Eastern Europe. With the inclusion of Galicia in the Austrian Empire, Hasidism also gained adherents among Hungarian Jewry. At this time Hasidism also developed systematic schools of theology, such as the more intellectual and study-centered Habad Hasidism. Some Hasidic personalities, like Levi Isaac of Berdichev, were venerated by all Jewry as models of piety and love of humanity. The spiritual outlook and pattern of leadership of the practical *zaddik* also crystallized in this generation. With such diversification in leadership and attitudes, it is not to be wondered that from this generation on there was considerable and undisguised tension between the various Hasidic courts and dynasties, which sometimes flared up into bitter and prolonged conflicts.

By the 1830s the main surge of the spread of Hasidism was spent. From a persecuted sect it had become the way of life and the leadership structure of the majority of Jews in the Ukraine, Galicia, and central Poland, and it had sizable groups of followers in Belorussia-Lithuania and Hungary. With the great waves of

*Tension and
Rivalry*

*Wins
Legitimacy*

emigration to the West beginning in 1881, Hasidism was carried to Western Europe and to an even greater extent to the United States. In the West its character was gradually, but ever more rapidly, diluted and its influence became more external and formal. With the abatement of the struggle against Hasidism by the end of its third generation and its acceptance as part of the Orthodox camp, Hasidism attained the distinction of being the first religious trend in Judaism since the days of the Second Temple which had a self-defined way of life and a distinctive rite of worship but yet was acknowledged (albeit somewhat grudgingly) by those who differed from it as a legitimate Jewish phenomenon.

4. CLEAVING TO GOD

Many of Hasidism's basic ideas are rooted in earlier Jewish sources – Kabbalistic literature in particular – but it nevertheless produced much that was new if only by emphasis. With few exceptions, Hasidic ideas are not presented systematically in the Hasidic writings, but an examination of these writings reveals certain patterns common to all the Hasidic masters.

'Thou Shalt Cleave to Him'

It is generally agreed that the central tendency of Hasidic teaching is *devekut*, meaning "adhesion" or "cleaving" to God. "There is one *mitzvah* in the Torah which includes everything," said Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, "and that is 'Thou shalt cleave unto Him.' " In Kabbalistic literature the usual meaning of *devekut* is "communion with God," which is achieved mainly during the time of prayer or meditation before prayer through using the right *kavvanot*, the mystical interpretations and meanings given to the words of prayer. There *devekut* is usually described as the highest step on a spiritual ladder, which is reached after the

believer has mastered the attitudes of fear of God, love of God, and so forth. In Ḥasidism, however, *devekut* became not only the



As the soul of the worshiper leaps in ecstasy to its Divine Source, so some of the Ḥasidic sects encouraged violent movements in prayer. This painting of a Ḥasid dancing is by Agadati (1923).

supreme achievement of religious life but also its starting point. *Devekut*, according to the Ḥasidim, should be the believer's constant state of mind, not only during the high points of prayer and religious activity but even when he is engaged in the everyday affairs of life.

Beginning with the Ba'al Shem Tov, we find the Ḥasidic masters advocating the hallowing of all life. In whatever he is doing, man must dedicate himself to God. "The outer world no longer stood as an obstacle to the service of God, it became a means for the service of the Creator." This ideal of the consecration of the everyday is the point of many Ḥasidic tales.

Consecration, the Everyday

Thus, Rabbi Nahman of Kossov, a disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov, taught that we should always have the Lord in our thoughts.



Two young boys studying together in *heder* in Poland, before the Second World War.

He was asked whether this was possible when a man was engaged in buying and selling. "Of course we can," Nahman answered. "If we are able to think of business when we are praying, we should be able to think of praying when we are doing business."

When a teamster asked Rabbi Levi Isaac of Berdichev whether he should give up his occupation because it interfered with regular attendance at the synagogue, the Rabbi asked him whether he carried poor travelers free of charge. The teamster said that he did. "Then," ruled the Rabbi, "you serve the Lord in

*As Good as
Prayer*

your occupation just as faithfully as you would by frequenting the synagogue."

Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk once astonished a number of learned visitors when he posed the question: "Where is the dwelling of God?" They laughed: "What a thing to ask! Is not the whole world filled with His glory?" Then he gave his own answer to his question: "God dwells wherever man lets Him in."

Hasidism, in other words, denied the existence of a dichotomy between the life of the spirit and life in the world. The Ba'al Shem Tov interpreted the verse "In all thy ways know Him" thus: "Even in every bodily thing that you do it is necessary that it be a service of a higher need . . . all for the sake of heaven." In Hasidic parlance this doctrine is known as *avodah be-gashmiyyut* ("the service of God through corporeality"): the human physical dimension is regarded as an area in which man is capable of religious behavior. Man should not be overly concerned with the upper world, but "in this lower world, the world of corporeality, let the hidden life of God shine forth."

*In This Lower
World*

Hanokh of Aleksandrow (1798-1870) gave a unique interpretation to the verse in the Psalms: "The heavens are the hea-



vens of the Lord, but the earth hath He given to the children of men." It goes thus: "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord – you see they are already of a heavenly character. 'But the earth hath He given to the children of men' – so that they might make of it something heavenly."

The Hasidic concept of corporeal worship has been poetically explained by Martin Buber: "One eats in consecration, one savors one's food in consecration, and the table becomes an altar. One works in consecration and lifts the sparks that are hidden in all tools [vessels]. One walks over the fields in consecration, and the silent songs of all creatures, those they speak to God, enter into the song of one's own soul. One drinks to one's companions in consecration, each to the other, and it is as if one studies together with them in the Torah. One dances in consecration, and a splendor radiates over the community. A man is united with his wife in consecration, and the *Shekhinah* rests over them."

In the teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov the doctrine of worship through corporeality was carried to the extreme, culminating in the tenet that man must worship God with both the good and evil in his nature. It was man's duty to 'transform' evil into good, through an actual confrontation of evil in its own domain. If you discover at night that a thief has crept into your house, and cry out, the thief will flee, and it is all as if nothing had happened. It is better not to alarm the thief but let him draw near until you can lay hold of him and bind him. For then, instead of merely driving away the evil, you transform it into good.

Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezhibezh, conceived of *avodah be-gashmiyyut* as indispensable, although he covertly questioned whether every man was permitted to engage in it. In fact, a pupil of one of the Maggid's disciples, Meshullam Feivush of Zbarazh, specifically states that it was not the Maggid's intention to proclaim *avodah be-gashmiyyut* as a general practice but rather as one intended for spiritually superior individuals who would be

*Consecration
of All Things*

*Don't Alarm the
Thief*

*The Limits of
Worship
through
Corporeality*

35

The community is a living organism with the *zaddik* as its soul; the Munkaceve rebbe and his disciples in Poland before the Second World War.

immune to the danger of the concept's vulgarization. One of the Maggid's most important disciples, Shneur Zalman of Lyady, mentions the practice with a touch of derision. Nevertheless, it came to occupy a central place in Hasidic literature. The meaning and limits of the concept served as a focal point of an ongoing controversy among the movement's adherents.

Prayer – A Mystical Encounter with God

Prayer in Hasidism is a mystical encounter with the Divine, the heart leaping in ecstasy to its Source. Violent movements in prayer were not unusual; some of the Hasidic groups even encouraged their followers to turn somersaults during their prayers. Prayer is frequently seen in Hasidism as man's most important religious activity. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady, the founder of the intellectual Habad sect in Hasidism, wrote: "For although the forms of the prayers and the duty of praying three times a day are rabbinic, the idea of prayer is the foundation of the whole Torah."

A man at prayer in the view of Hasidism, finds himself in conflict with the external world. Said Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomer (died 1800): "All the thoughts and associations with which he busied himself when he went out to his work and his business . . . and talked and bargained with the uncircumcised: now at the time of study and prayer they rise before his eyes, and these are the very 'alien thoughts' that come to man at the time of study and prayer." Prayer requires a great effort of concentration if man is to overcome the tendency of external reality to permeate his consciousness. This quite natural tendency is considered in Hasidism as the "wayfaring" of thought and as such is the very opposite of its concentration, which requires a turning *Annihilate* away from the world and which is based on man's ability to *Human* achieve pure introspection devoid of all content. The function of *Thought* this introspection is to achieve the utter voiding ("annihilation") of human thought and to uplift the element of divinity latent in



Early Hasidim held that *devekut* while studying, in the sense of intense concentration on the letters of the text, could reveal on earth the divine forces by which God governs the world. Painting by Lazar Krestin (1902).

man's soul. The transformation of this element from a latent to an active condition is understood as true union with God, the state marking the climax of *devekut*. "Do you wish to know

what is proper prayer?" asked Jacob Isaac of Przysucha. "When you are so engrossed that you do not feel a knife thrust into your body, then you are offering prayer aright." The spiritual effort involved in prayer was considered so strenuous as to give rise to the Hasidic dictum, "I give thanks to God that I remain alive after praying." It was said of Uri ben Pinhas of Strelisk (died 1826) that every day before saying his prayers he bade farewell to his wife and family for fear that he might die of ecstasy in the middle of his devotions.

For Hasidism prayer is primarily a ladder by means of which man can ascend to *devekut* and union with the Divinity. The individualistic tendencies inherent in prayer through *devekut*, however, did not lead the Hasidim to belittle the importance of communal worship, nor did they demand of the Hasid that he achieve *devekut* outside the bounds of the community and the halakhic framework of prayer. But many Hasidic groups, otherwise strictly conformist, disregarded the laws governing prayer at fixed times on the grounds that these interfere with the need for adequate preparation and with the spontaneity which is part of the prayer's essence. "In Kotsk," said Rabbi Menahem Mendel, "we have a soul and not a clock." It was not long, however, before the Hasidim felt themselves in danger of jeopardizing the framework of the *halakhah* and, for the most part, they recanted and accepted the authority of the existing frameworks.

Devekut, which became the banner under which Hasidism went forth to revitalize religious life and modify the time-honored hierarchy of values in Judaism, quickly led to a confrontation between it and the daily pattern of existence of the Hasid. It was not only traditional worship that was brought face to face with new problems; the same held true for Torah study. There was not a fundamental revolt against the study of Torah as such, and few Hasidic masters subscribed to the view of Menahem Mendel of Peremyshlany (born 1728), an early follower of the Ba'al Shem Tov, that Torah study and the practice

*A Soul and Not
a Clock*

*A New Scale of
Values*

of devotion were incompatible. ("If we divert our thoughts from devotion to God," he said, "and study excessively, we will forget the fear of Heaven.") But Hasidism did challenge the traditional notion that Torah study – *talmud torah* – is the supreme religious duty of the Jew. And *deveikut* laid claim to so large a part of man's day that little time was left for learning. Pinhas of Karitz, of the circle of the Ba'al Shem Tov, gave a picturesque definition of the new hierarchy of values: "I am in constant fear that I shall turn out to be wiser than I am pious."

For the Ba'al Shem Tov, the study of Torah was not an end in itself. The Torah should be studied, not for the sake of acquiring knowledge, but in order to learn the true service of God from it. The early Hasidic masters accused the conventional scholars of engaging in Torah study for motives of fame, wealth and prestige -- and hence, of not living up to the rabbinic ideal of *Torah li-shemah*, i.e., the Torah should not be studied from any worldly motives but "for its own sake." But early Hasidism went much further and gave the very concept of *Torah li-shemah* an entirely new interpretation. It now was said to mean *deveikut* while studying, especially in the sense that intense concentration on the letters of the text could reveal on earth the divine forces by means of which God governs the world. The comparatively large number of classical talmudic scholars among the second and third generations of Hasidic masters, however, prevented any radical departure from the older ideal.

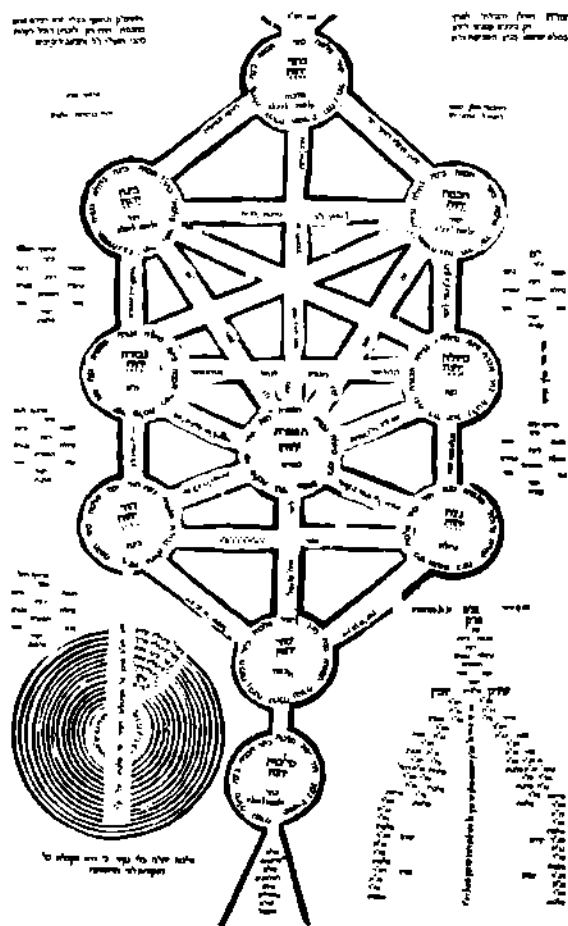
*Torah
li-Shemah*

Even the importance of the *mitzvot* was overshadowed by *deveikut* since the fulfillment of the *mitzvot* was assessed in terms of the *deveikut* achieved by man. "Performance of the *mitzvah* without *deveikut* is meaningless" was a widespread Hasidic slogan. In the new scale of values the *mitzvah* itself became a means – and only one of several – to *deveikut*. "The reason why we should do what the Law commands is not to gain grace thereby in the eyes of God, but to learn how to love God and to be united to Him. The important thing is not how many separate

injunctions are obeyed, but how and in what spirit we obey them. The object of fulfilling these various ordinances is to put oneself, as it were, on the same plane with God, and thus, in the ordinary phrase of the religious mystic, to become one with Him."

A Gospel of Joy and Optimism

Hasidism preached a gospel of joy, optimism and self-worth through religious experience. Aaron of Karlin (1736-72), the



The ten *sefirot* (emanations) from God according to kabbalistic theory represented in the form of a tree. The diagram at the lower left is probably a cross-section of a tree trunk.



"A Jew," by Isidor Kaufmann.



"Portrait of a Young Man," by
Isidor Kaufmann.

A Hasidic family in Jerusalem
sets out for a stroll on Purim
morning to deliver the *mishlo'ah
manot*, the traditional food gifts
which are exchanged by friends



pioneer of Hasidism in Lithuania, regarded melancholy as "the lowest abyss." He taught that the Jew who does not rejoice in being a Jew is ungrateful to Heaven. The Maggid of Mezhibezh employed the following homily: "When a king is at a celebration he can be approached by many people who otherwise would be denied entrance to the palace. Likewise when we serve God with joy, he is more approachable." Hanokh of Aleksandrow underscored the importance of joy with these words: "Do you wish to know how important it is to be full of joy at all times? Moses enumerated a long series of curses (Deuteronomy 28) and explained in verse 47: "...because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart."

Hasidic optimism and joy are based on the notion that there is nothing in the universe but God. Rabbi Menaḥem Mendel, the third rabbi of Lubavich, observed that the disciples of the Ba'al Shem Tov gave the "very profound" turn to the doctrine of the oneness of God so that it means not only that He is unique, as the medieval thinkers said, but that He is all that is; there is no reality in created things. For if the world and its sorrows do not enjoy true existence and the divine light and vitality pervade all, what cause is there for despair or despondency? When man rejoices that he has been called to serve God, he bestirs the divine joy in heaven and blessing flows through all creation. A melancholy frame of mind is anathema to Hasidism, serving only to create a barrier between man and his Maker. Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav held that dejection is one of the major reasons for man's drifting away from God, which in turn leads him to sin.

*Nothing but
God*

Even over his sins a man should not grieve overmuch: "At times the evil inclination misleads man into thinking that he has committed a serious sin when it was actually nothing but a peccadillo or no sin at all, the intention having been to bring man into a state of melancholy," the Ba'al Shem Tov taught. "But melancholy is a great hindrance to God's service. Even if a man has stumbled and sinned he should not become too sad because

*Danger of
Melancholy*

this will prevent him from worshipping God." Aaron the Second, of Karlin, (died 1872) taught that "repentance comes essentially out of joy and delight."

The study of the Torah, prayer, and other religious duties must be carried out in love and fear, Hasidism teaches. The bare deed without the love and fear of God is like a bird without wings. A Hasidic tale relates that the Ba'al Shem Tov could not bring himself to enter a certain synagogue because it was full of lifeless prayers which, lacking the wings of love and fear, were unable to ascend to heaven. As observant Jews the Hasidim did not seek to deny the value of the deed as such but they repeatedly taught that the deed could be elevated only when carried out in a spirit of devotion. Hayyim of Czernowitz writes: "There is a man whose love for his God is so strong and faithful that he carries out each *mitzvah* with superlative excellence, strength and marvelous power, waiting in longing to perform the *mitzvah*, his soul expiring in yearning. . . . Such a man's *mitzvot* are those which fly ever upward in joy and satisfaction to draw down from there every kind of blessing and flow of grace to all worlds."

This idea was applied to all of man's deeds, and not to his religious obligations alone. In all things there are "holy sparks" (*nitzot*) waiting to be redeemed and rescued for sanctity by man's using his appetites to serve God. The most profane action can be done in holiness, and when a man performs it in holiness he praises the sparks. Even the taste of food is a reflection (albeit a pale one) of the spiritual force that brings the food into being. Man should be led on by it to contemplate the divine vitality in the food and thus to God Himself. In the words of the highly charged mythology of the Lurianic Kabbalah, the "holy sparks" released by man provide the *Shekhinah* (the Divine Presence which resides in this world) with her "female waters" which, in turn, cause the flow of the "male waters" and thus help "the unification of the Holy One, blessed be He, and His *Shekhinah*"

*Like a Bird
Without Wi*

*Redeem the
Sparks*

to produce cosmic harmony. Because of the significance of man's role in the sacred marriage and its importance in the Hasidic scheme, the Hasidim adopted from the Kabbalists the formula: "For the sake of the unification of the Holy One, blessed be He, and His *Shekhinah*" (*le-shem yihud . . .*) before the performance of every *mitzvah*. (The redemption of the "holy sparks" was one of the reasons given for Hasidic fondness for tobacco. Smoking a pipe served to release subtle "sparks" not otherwise accessible.) According to Gershom Scholem, the doctrine of the holy sparks is "probably the most important legacy of the Lurianic Kabbalah to Hasidism."

5. THE ZADDIK

Is the program of sustained contemplation and utter devotion to God that has been sketched in the last few pages really possible for all men? For the most part the Hasidic answer is in the negative. That is why the doctrine of zaddikism is so important for Hasidism. The holy man – the zaddik – his thoughts constantly on God, uplifts the prayers of his followers and all their other thoughts and actions.

The zaddik must simultaneously observe the *mitzvah* of *devekut* and maintain contact with the world about him. Rabbi Hayyim Mordecai Rosenbaum (b.1904).



The doctrine of the *zaddik* was first set forth in Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye's *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef* which, as we have already noted, consists to a large extent of the teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov, and which is regarded as the most important work in the entire Hasidic literature. Later Hasidic masters made alterations in this doctrine and, in practice, the character of the *zaddik* and his relations with his followers differed from one Hasidic court to another.

The Intermediary Between God and Israel

Jacob Joseph describes the *zaddik*, like Moses, as the intermediary between God and Israel. He is the "channel" through which the constant spiritual outpouring (*shefa*) from heaven is



General view of the eastern wall of the Bratslav synagogue in Jerusalem.



The chair of Reb Nahman of Bratslav. No rabbi succeeded Reb Nahman as rebbe of the Bratslaver Hasidim, and they continue to venerate only him. (For this reason they are sometimes called the Toite [Dead] Hasidim.) Reb Nahman's chair is used only at circumcision ceremonies when the infant is laid on it briefly. When the Bratslaver Hasidim fled Europe at the outbreak of the Nazi terror, the chair was broken up and each piece was separately smuggled to Israel by the Bratslavers. In Israel in 1936 they grouped together once again and reassembled the chair. It now stands in the Bratslav synagogue in the Mea Shearim quarter of Jerusalem.

transmitted to the people. And this function of transmission is an indispensable aspect of the zaddik's task. "If he who receives *shefa* does not hand it over to others, it will be cut off from him as well. . . . If he wants to receive he must give to others." In the opposite direction, too, the zaddik is the intermediary; he enables the people to attain *devekut*, to draw close to God. For not every man is capable of achieving *devekut* by his own efforts. Most individuals will find it necessary to cleave to the zaddik, and then be raised with him to the stage of cleaving to God.

*Gives and
Receives*

But just as the people need the zaddik, the zaddik needs the people; alone each is incomplete. Each of them is only a half, and they require one another as a man and his wife. The zaddik is likened to the head or the eyes of the body, and the multitude to the feet. The community is thus conceived as a living organism, the zaddik being its life and soul in his generation. And the interrelationship in this corporate body is such that any failure on the part even of the lowest member will be reflected — and to a far more damaging degree — in the state of "the head" — the zaddik. None of the members can cleave truly to God so long as even one of them is not conscious of his need to be uplifted through the head. Hence it is the duty of the zaddik to exert his influence over each and every one in his community.

*A Living
Organism*

A Mystic in the Community of Men

In order to fulfill his destiny the zaddik must achieve what Scholem has called the paradox of being a mystic in the community of men. For he must simultaneously observe the *mitzvah* of *devekut* and maintain contact with the material world through the circle about him, even those who are counted as sinners. Not for him is the sanctuary of the House of Study or the solitude of a monastic cell. Spiritually alone with God, he is the center of his community. He influences society and is influenced by it. The sins of his contemporaries affect him and reduce his stature, while his sinful thoughts stimulate others to sin. The task of the



A *farbrengen* (gathering) of Habad Hasidim in Brooklyn, New York. The present rebbe, Menahem Mendel Schneersohn, is seated at the center of the table and is leaning forward to speak to some of his Hasidim. A *farbrengen* is a gathering of Hasidim in the presence of the rebbe in celebration of occasions and anniversaries important to the group.

zaddik is to teach the people to worship God by means of *devekut* and to bring sinners to repentance.

Moreover, for the sake of this unification with the multitude, and in order to be able to uplift it, a zaddik may sometimes have to descend from his own level and sin. This concept of the “descent of the zaddik” – which has its origin in Kabbalistic literature – holds an important place in the teachings of Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye. He illustrates it by the famous parable of the king’s son.

*Descent of the
Zaddik*



Left : Rabbi Jacob Joseph Twersky, surrounded by his followers. Rabbi Twersky died in 1968.

Right : The Klausenburger rebbe reciting *havdalah* at the conclusion of the Sabbath.

A king sent his only son away from the royal palace to a village so that he might afterward yearn all the more for his father's table. Because of his foolishness, the prince mingled with the strangers in the village, learned their ways and, after a time, forgot the royal pleasures. The king sent one of his nobles after the prince to bring him back, but he failed. Another was sent, and then another and another, but none succeeded. At last one of the nobles discovered the secret. He removed his elegant *The King's So*

clothing and put on plain clothes like those of the villagers, in order that he might have something in common with the prince and enter into conversation with him. He succeeded, and returned him to his father.

The zaddik, in other words, must stoop to conquer. He descends spiritually to the sinner, associates with him, and by his own ascent raises him and restores him to goodness, aiding him in purifying himself of his blemishes. "He is like one," said Levi Isaac of Berdichev, "who would raise his fellow from slime and rubbish: he too must go down near the slime and rubbish to raise him up." For if the zaddik himself is free of sin and guilt, he will be unable to raise up the multitude. He is like a broom: in order to sweep clean it must come in contact with dirt. "Thus Caleb joined himself to the spies, saying that he agreed with them, so that in the end, he was able to silence them."

*Down to the
Slime*

It is said in the Ethics of the Fathers: "The boldfaced go to hell, the shamefaced to paradise." Rabbi Zusya expounded these words as follows: "The bold is he whom men call the zaddik; his sanctity emboldens him to descend hellward to carry aloft that which is low; he is not afraid of wickedness on the streets and at county fairs. But the shamefaced who fears infection must continually keep on a level with paradise; he must always pray and study and shun contact with those whom the zaddik lifts from the mire."

*The Zaddik
Descends to
Hell*

Jacob Joseph enjoins the ordinary Jew to believe in the zaddik with absolute faith, without any afterthoughts or doubts as to the zaddik's way of life, because all his actions are performed for the sake of heaven. The "man of matter" must also support the zaddik financially to enable him to fulfill his task successfully and devote himself to God through Torah study and prayer.

Practical Zaddikism

Elimelech of Lyzhansk (1717-87), a disciple of the Maggid of Mezhirech, offered another rationale for the support of the zad-

dik by his followers: this financial assistance was not for the zaddik's sake but for the sake of those privileged to help him. By supporting the zaddik with their worldly goods his Hasidim become attached to him through his dependence on them, which he readily accepts in his love for them. Their welfare thus becomes his, and his prayers on their behalf can be more readily answered. Elimelech is considered the theoretician and creator of "practical zaddikism." In his comprehensive work of zaddikism, *Noam Elimelekh* (1787), the zaddik appears as a spiritual superman, with the power to work miracles. He is the man to whom God has given control of the universe by his prayers. He even has power over life and death. God may have decreed that a person should die but this can be nullified by the prayers of the zaddik.

A disciple of Elimelech's, Jacob Isaac ("the Seer") of Lublin (1745-1815), likewise emphasized the practical work of the zaddik, his duty to care for the "life and livelihood" of his "children," the Hasidic congregation. Believing that material abundance preceded spiritual wealth, he held that to help a person repent it was first necessary to help him obtain his material needs. The zaddik ought "to extend great abundance and a comfortable living so that the people will be free to worship God." He is reported as having said that when the body enjoys plenty the soul too enjoys spiritual richness. But this accent on the zaddik's need to care for the multitude of Hasidim alienated those Lublin Hasidim who thought that the stress should be put on the aspiration toward spiritual perfection and constant *devekut*, who regarded the Hasidic zaddik as a guide to divine worship and not as a miracle worker. This atmosphere of "practical zaddikism" cultivated by the Seer was the background to his controversy with his most outstanding disciple, Jacob Isaac of Przysucha (1746-1814), known as *ha-Yehudi ha-Kadosh*, "the Holy Jew," who eventually left his master and gathered around him disciples of his own. The controversy divided Polish Hasidism for many years.

*A Spiritual
Superman*

*The Body
Before the Soul*



Jekuthiel Judah Halberstam of Klausenburg at the Western Wall with his followers.

A unique theory of the *zaddik* is that of Nahman of Bratslav *Nahman of Bratslav* (1772-1811), a great-grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov. It maintains that there is only one true *zaddik* – Nahman himself – who is destined to be the Messiah. The Moses-like *zaddik* gives redemptive force to the prayers of the general community. The great *zaddik*'s reflection on heretical questions may bring about the spiritual elevation of those who were formerly sunk in error. Even the *niggun* (Hasidic melody) sung by the *zaddik* has a similar influence. The biblical injunction, "I have set the Lord always before me" also applies to the Hasid's relationship with the *zaddik*. It is necessary to acknowledge that the "zaddik simulates his Creator," and that "through his teachings the *zaddik* teaches the Holy One, blessed be He, how to deal with us." The *zaddik* lives eternally, as it were, regardless of where he dwells, on earth or in the grave. A man must travel to the *zaddik* because "the main thing is what he hears from the mouth of the *zaddik*." Nahman strongly emphasizes the obligation of confession before the *zaddik* and advocates praising him. Since the *zaddik* embodies all that is happening in the earthly and divine worlds, communication with him advances the processes of *tikkun* that Lurianic Kabbalah demands of Jews.

Is the Mediation of the *Zaddik* Indispensable?

On the other hand, there were leading Hasidic masters who held that the mediation of the *zaddik* was not indispensable. Thus, Dov Baer of Mezhirech held that every man can achieve direct contact with the Divine. While Dov Baer agreed with Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye that the *zaddik* is an intercessor for the bestowal of *shefa*, he regarded the social function of the *zaddik* as being on a lower plane than his mystical activity, in which he struggles to attain a life of utter holiness. There are even *zaddikim* who are compelled to withdraw from the people, Dov Baer maintained, because their contact with society is liable to result in their downfall. (When the Maggid realized that he had become

known to the world, he begged God to tell him what sin of his had brought this punishment upon him.) Even Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye does not consistently describe the zaddik's mediation as a *sine qua non*. From some of his statements on the subject it would appear that only if one is unable to achieve *devekut* on his own should he seek to achieve it through the zaddik. In Habad Hasidism the leadership of the zaddik is mainly spiritual: encounters between him and his Hasidim are devoted to the study of Torah and ethics and to discussion of the problems of the community.

In practice, however, most zaddikim (or rebbes) were regarded by their Hasidim as wonder-healers, oracles and miracle workers (see page 11). One of the most prominent of these was Israel of Kozienice (1733-1814), also known as the Maggid of Koznitz, who gained great popularity as a "practical zaddik," actively assisting his Hasidim with their family problems and in their struggle to make a livelihood; he even distributed remedies and amulets. For this activity he was sharply criticized by the Mitnaggedim, while the Hasidim justified it, explaining that the amulets contained his name only. According to one Hasidic tale, Israel's disciples informed him one day that an elderly woman had borne a son even though she had not gone to a rebbe for a blessing. "Well, what of it?" commented the Maggid. "The Lord sometimes likes to show that He can accomplish a miracle, the same as a rebbe."

*Remedies and
Amulets*

This "zaddik-worship" is probably the aspect of Hasidism that was most severely attacked by students of the movement. They were no doubt influenced by the excesses of some zaddikim in the middle of the 19th century. There were zaddikim who led an unwholesome life of luxury, and even those who, under the pretense of concealing their piety, indulged in dissipation and immorality. Solomon Schechter, in his classical essay on Hasidism, blamed zaddikism for the "corruption and perversion" of the movement. Schechter charged the later

*Schechter on
Zaddik-Worship*

Hasidim with having taken a relatively minor point in the Ba'al Shem Tov's teaching – the honor due to the divine in man – and given it an exaggerated and distorted importance. The unfortunate result, was “an almost idolatrous service of their living leaders.”

Schechter maintained that it was the “peculiar doctrine of the Intermediary” that soon became Hasidism's distinguishing feature. “By a Chassid was understood not a man who held such and such opinions in theology and religion, but a believer in the Zaddik, and one who sought to attain salvation through the worship of the Zaddik. Every other doctrine of Chassidism was



Left : Solomon Halberstam of Bobov, born in 1908, the present leader of the Bobover Hasidim.

Right : Joel Teitelbaum, the Satmarer rebbe.

rapidly pushed into the background and overlooked. Even the grand and fundamental doctrine of Omnipresence in the Creation was veiled by the special presence in the Zaddik. Chassidism became mere Zaddikism. . . .”

As against this indictment of later Hasidism we have the more recent verdict of Gershom Scholem that zaddikism was in no sense a corruption of the “pure” Hasidism of the Ba’al Shem Tov. “This simon-pure Hasidism never existed because anything like it could never have influenced more than a few people. The . . . later development of zaddikism was already implicit in the very start of the Hasidic movement. As soon as the mystic felt the urge to perpetuate his personal and solitary experience in the life of a community . . . the believer no longer needed the Kabbalah; he turned its mysteries into reality by fastening upon certain traits which the saint, or zaddik, whose example he strove to follow, had placed in the center of his relation to God. . . . All this demanded from the first . . . the existence of the zaddik or saint as the actual proof of the possibility of living up to the ideal.” Scholem is of course not defending “zaddik-worship”; he is simply trying to put the phenomenon in the proper historical perspective.

Scholem's View

6. FERVOR PLUS REASON

Isaac Leib Peretz, in his heartwarming tale about a Hasidic rebbe, “If Not Higher,” gives us a vivid definition of a “Litvak.” To say that Litvaks are Lithuanian Jews is correct but hardly adequate, Peretz tells us. As far as the Hasidim were concerned, the Litvaks were “casuists, intellectual exhibitionists, verbal prestidigitators, dry-hearted, small-spirited, ingenious manipulators of Talmudic texts. . . . Rational and pedantic, they knew only such truths – if such truths there be – that can be demonstrated black on white, deduced from the Talmud and its commentaries, which of course



Shneur Zalman of
Lyady (1747-1813),
founder of Habad
Hasidism.

they knew by heart. But of the truths of the heart – and perhaps these are the only truths – they knew nothing.”

Shneur Zalman of Lyady

If, in the third generation of the movement, Hasidism struck roots in the hostile soil of Lithuania, this was due mainly to the personality and efforts of Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745-1813), whom we have already had occasion to mention. At the age of twenty, he left his wife with her parents and went to Mezhirech to learn Hasidism from the Great Maggid. It is said that he took this step after arriving at the conclusion that he knew “a little about learning but nothing about prayer.” How much he actually knew about prayer is unknown, but for learning that is surely an understatement, for at the age of 12 he had been recognized as an *illui* – a child prodigy – and accepted as a colleague and an



Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneersohn, the present Lubavicher rebbe, completing the *mitzvah* of dressing a Torah scroll.



A typical scene in a Hasidic *shtetl*, entitled "Study," by Isidor Kaufmann. The rabbi, leaning on a movable lectern or *shtender*, leads an informal study group.

equal by the leading scholars of Vitebsk, where he was then *The Litvak* studying. Among the Maggid's disciples Shneur Zalman was known as "the Litvak," but his mastery of talmudic literature was soon recognized, and the Maggid assigned him the task of composing a new and up-to-date *Shulhan Arukh* (code of Jewish law).

We have noted that after the Maggid's death in 1772, the leadership of the Hasidic movement became diffused. Shneur Zalman not only attracted many devoted disciples of his own, but by 1788 it became apparent that he had created a distinct type of Hasidism, which was to become known as "Habad" a name derived from the initial letters of the three highest of the ten *sefirot*, or spheres, to which according to the Kabbalah emanate from God: *hokhmah* (wisdom), *binah* (reason), *da'at* (knowledge). In other words reason and intellect were to be *Reason Reinstated* reinstated as a way to find God. Before the advent of Shneur Zalman, Hasidism had not been based on any system that could

Chaim Gorr's portrait of the sixth Lubavicher rebbe, Joseph Isaac Schneersohn (1880-1950), a descendant of Shneur Zalman of Lyady, and father-in-law of the present Lubavicher rebbe. The latter, Menahem Mendel Schneersohn, is also a descendant of Shneur Zalman through another branch of the family.





Shneur Zalman stressed the need for regular study and unceasing spiritual exercise as the way to find God. This painting by the German artist, Prischenfried, is entitled "The Talmud Scholar." The books which are being studied, however, are clearly not copies of the Talmud, nor is there any reason why the boy should be wearing a *tallit* while he studies.

be studied by regular methods. This he changed with the publication of his *Likkutei Amarim* ("collected sayings"), popularly known as the *Tanya*. A masterly and systematic exposition of Hasidism, it was accepted as "the written law of Habad."

Herem and Counter-Herem

Shneur Zalman stressed the necessity for regular study and unceasing spiritual exercise as indispensable for the achievement

of lasting results. From this he derived a new ethical concept of the *beinoni* ("the average man"). The *zaddik* he defined as an exceptional type, whose characteristics are inborn and who directs all his spiritual life towards attaining the transition to the Divine. This person is extremely rare, however, and there exists a hiatus between him and the average man that is almost impossible to bridge. The practical Jewish ideal is a different figure, that of the *beinoni*.

The *beinoni* that "every man should aspire to become" is the person who does not manage in the unconscious depths of his soul to achieve complete spiritual identity with the Divine, yet who in his everyday life, as also in his emotions and intellect, strives toward perfection. Whereas the *zaddik* is chosen from birth, the ideal of the *beinoni* can be achieved in practice and is expected of every Jew. In contrast to the Ba'al Shem Tov, *Differs With the Besht* Shneur Zalman held that it is not expected of the *beinoni* to transform "alien thoughts"; he is required to turn away from them, to resist evil throughout his life. It is only the *zaddik* that is not forbidden contact with the powers of temptation. Instinctive reverence, like "the hidden love that is in the heart of every Jew from birth," forms the primary basis from which every *beinoni* may advance to higher degrees of perfection. The struggle of the *beinoni* against the evil impulse (*yezer ha-ra*) within him is sustained by the fact that "the brain rules the heart from birth" and by perseverance in resort to meditation (*hitbonenut*). One might well conclude that the *beinoni* is now, in fact, not "average" at all but the righteous man who struggles against the evil within him in order to do God's will.

Meditation on the greatness of the Creator, on love and reverence for Him, results in the elevation of the primitive feelings in the sacred soul to a higher degree of "love and rational reverence," Shneur Zalman taught. This does not necessarily imply an intellectual or rationalist approach to adherence to God, but is essentially the propulsion of the hidden emotional

life to a degree of full awareness. Similarly, there must be strict adherence to the norms of traditional Jewish ethical behavior, such as punctiliousness in the performance of the *mitzvot*, additional stress on Torah study, and the worship of God in joyousness while repressing melancholy. Attaching particular significance to the role of meditation as a primary means of achieving elevation in the Hasidic progression, Shneur Zalman regarded the study of Kabbalah not as a theoretical exercise but essentially as a means of strengthening faith in the Creator and of arousing the heart. *Study of Kabbalah*

Shneur Zalman held that the physical world, precisely because it conceals the divine manifestation, is an expression of the highest degree of the divinity ("material creation derives from the divine substance"). From this explanation certain conclusions follow concerning the conduct of man: fulfillment of the practical precepts, precisely because they are materialistic, and study of the Torah, precisely because it is linked with material factors in the world, are higher degrees than theoretical spiritual adhesion to God. Observance of the *mitzvot*, such as Torah study, forms a link – and in fact the only one – of real adhesion to God. It follows that love of God and reverence for Him, and even the feeling of adhesion to Him, are only a means of arousing the soul towards the true adhesion – through Torah study and observance of the *mitzvot*. *Mitzvot as a Link to God*

Since the way to God thus depends on essentially the individual's own efforts – on his study, his meditation and his observance of the *mitzvot* – the mediation of the *zaddik* is no longer required. He is no longer an intercessor and miracle worker but a spiritual guide and leader. In practice, however, Shneur Zalman was only partially successful in curbing *zaddik*-worship. Habad Hasidim flocked to Lyady in such numbers that he was compelled to issue rules which provided, *inter alia*, that no Hasid was to visit the city more than once a year. "I cannot adequately describe," he wrote in a pastoral letter to his fol-



Boys from both Ashkenazi and Sephardi backgrounds studying at the Lubavicher yeshivah at Kefar Habad in Israel. Hasidism today is also attracting Jews of Oriental extraction.

lowers in 1793, "the extent to which my very life is embittered by those who come in to me to pour out before me personally their sorrow in detail."

Shneur Zalman has been called the "Maimonides of Hasidism." But his synthesis of Hasidic fervor and worship with Lithuanian rationality and learning did not have the effect – not during his own lifetime at any rate – of making Hasidism any more acceptable to the Mitnaggedim. In fact, the opposite seems

to have been the case. The fact that Shneur Zalman's influence had begun to penetrate the strongholds of the Mitnaggedim spurred them to make a last effort to check the spread of Hasidism by informing on its leaders to the Russian government. Avigdor ben Joseph Hayyim, the rabbi of Pinsk, in 1798 formally *Arrested for* accused Shneur Zalman of treason against the state (his dispatch *Treason* of money to Palestine, for example, was described as "helping the Turkish sultan"). Shneur Zalman was arrested and taken to St. Petersburg for trial, eventually being acquitted and released. But for years afterwards Rabbi Avigdor was referred to in Hasidic writings as "Avigdor the wicked," "Avigdor the informer, may his memory be blotted out."

Nor did Shneur Zalman's insistence that there could be no *Opposition* true fear and love of God without intellectual inquiry and effort *From Within* endear him to other leaders *within* the Hasidic camp. Most of the latter preferred the virtue of simple faith in God and in the sages, fearing that intellectual pursuit would lead to heresy. Abraham of Kalisk (1741-1810) who, like Shneur Zalman, had been a disciple of the Maggid of Mezhibezh, criticized him not only for his emphasis on intellectual inquiry but also for encouraging the study of the Lurianic Kabbalah and the esoteric teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov and the Maggid. (Shneur Zalman was equally at home in the Talmud and in the Kabbalah.) Such studies, thought Abraham of Kalisk, were meant only for a chosen few and not for the rank-and-file. To this day, in fact, other Hasidic trends tend to look upon the Habad-Lubavich wing as a breed apart.

7. BANS AND BOOK-BURNINGS

The anti-Hasidic forces, to which we have made a number of *The Gaon of* passing references, were led by one of the greatest spiritual and *Vilna* intellectual leaders of Jewry in modern times, Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna (1720-97), under whose influence Vilna — "the Jerusalem

of Lithuania” – took the lead in the battle against Hasidism. To the Gaon, Hasidism’s ecstasy, the visions seen and the miracles wrought by its leaders, and its enthusiastic way of life were not



A painting of Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (1720-1797), the Gaon of Vilna, and a leader of the anti-Hasidic forces.

only delusions but dangerous lies and idolatrous worship of human beings. The Hasidic elevation of contemplative prayer and the serving of God in joy over all other obligations, especially over the study of the Torah, seemed to be a complete reversal of the traditional scale of values. The bizarre practice of turning somersaults in prayer, which was followed by a number of the early Hasidim as an expression of self-abnegation, was held up to

[illegible]

ridicule, as was Hasidic indulgence in alcoholic stimulants and tobacco. Various Hasidic changes in the rules governing the knives used in *shehitah*, their switch from the Ashkenazi to the Lurianic-Sephardi prayer rite, their encouragement of young men to leave their families for long periods to stay at the court of the zaddik, were all anathema to the Mitnaggedim, who saw in the whole process a determined revolt against the established order. Rarely did Hasidism's opponents clearly express their real suspicion: that it was a new version of the messianic movements of Shabbetai Zevi and Jacob Frank — a suspicion that was the underlying reason for the vehemence of the various *herem* declarations and the polemical works of the Mitnaggedim.

Herem and Counter-Herem

In 1772 the Vilna Jewish community disbanded the *minyān* formed by the Hasidim and issued a *herem* against them; Hasidic works were burned, and the first anti-Hasidic pamphlet, *Zemir Arizim ve-Horvot Zurim* ("Uprooting of Tyrants and Flinty Swords"), was published. A *herem* against the Hasidim was also proclaimed in the city of Brody the same year. The Hasidim countered with a *herem* of their own and with burning the *Zemir Arizim*. In 1772 and again in 1777 Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk and Shneur Zalman of Lyady, the leaders of the Hasidic movement in Belorussia, traveled to Vilna to meet Elijah Gaon and demonstrate that the new movement did not conflict with traditional Judaism, but the Gaon refused to see them. After the publication in 1781 of Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye's *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*, with its criticism of the rabbis of the day, the Gaon intensified his fight against Hasidism. (Jacob Joseph denounced the ordinary type of rabbi as "Jewish demons, the equivalent of Satan and the evil inclination itself, all of their Torah studies being for their personal aggrandizement.") Through the Gaon's influence, another harsh *herem* was proclaimed against the Hasidim in 1781, and emissaries were sent

*Snubbed by the
Gaon*

Herem (excommunication order) imposed by the rabbis of Cracow on the city's Hasidim in 1786.



Isaac Erter (1791-1851)
wrote satires against
Hasidism. He depicted
the Hasidic world as
hypocritical, ignorant
and superstitious.

out to rouse the communities against the movement.

“They must leave our communities with their wives and children,” the ban declared, “and they should not be given a night’s lodging; their *shehitah* is forbidden; it is forbidden to do business with them and to intermarry with them, or to assist at their burial.” As a result of these bans merchants lost their customers, teachers lost their pupils, and betrothals were broken off. In this period it became the rule among the Mitnaggedim not to allow their children to marry into Hasidic families.

Vilna’s lead was followed by many other communities. The following circular is typical of the measures that failed to halt

*They Must
Leave Our
Communities*

Hasidism's progress. It was issued in 1786 by the anti-Hasidic community of Shklov, in White Russia:

Because of our many sins, worthless and wanton men who *Insane Worship* call themselves Hasidim have deserted the Jewish group and have set up a so-called place of worship for themselves. And thus, as everyone knows, they worship in a most insane fashion following a different ritual which does not conform to the religion of our holy Torah, and they tread a path which our fathers never trod. In addition to this the works of their teachers have, unfortunately, recently been published, and it is obvious to us that all of their writings are opposed to our holy Torah and that they contain misleading interpretations. The exaggerations and stories of miracles that are described in their books are particularly evident and obvious lies, and far be it from us to place any trust in any such exaggerated statements. And behold, as a result of this great misfortune, a fire has been kindled, unfortunately, in the midst of Jewry, and there is a breaking away from the obligations imposed by the Torah.



Caricature of a Brody Hasid by J. Pennell the 19th century English artist.

This indictment was followed by a list of rigorous measures that the disseminators of the circular urged all communities to adopt against the Hasidim. In addition to proclaiming a day of fasting and public prayer, and declaring meat slaughtered by Hasidic *shohetim* unfit to eat, the circular proposed the following action:

All possible measures are to be adopted to put an end to the *Rigorous* prayer-meetings of the heretics in all communities, so that *Measures* they will be deprived of the possibility of common assembly.

Careful watch is to be maintained that no one should study their literature, and search is to be made with this purpose in mind

No one is to shelter any member of this sect. No member of the above-mentioned sect may bring suit in a Jewish court. No community may permit any one of them to hold a position as cantor or rabbi, and it goes without saying that no one of them may teach our children.

It is to be announced in all communities that any one who knows anything, good or bad, about the Hasidim must bring his information to the court.

In the 1790s the struggle became even sharper. Around 1794 the Gaon gave instructions that *Zavva'at ha-Ribash* ("The Testament of Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov") should be publicly burned in Vilna. In 1796, the Hasidim having spread a rumor that Elijah regretted his stand against the movement, the Gaon replied in a letter sent by special emissaries to the communities of Lithuania and Belorussia: "I will continue to stand on guard, and it is the duty of every believing Jew to repudiate and pursue them with all manner of afflictions and subdue them, because they have sin in their hearts and are like a sore on the body of

*They Have Sin
in Their Hearts*

Israel." Not infrequently both Hasidim and their opponents denounced each other to the secular authorities, leading to the arrest of a number of Hasidic leaders and mutual calumnies of a grave nature.

The Criticism of Hayyim of Volozhin

It was a disciple of the Gaon of Vilna – Hayyim of Volozhin (1749-1821), founder of the renowned Yeshivah of Volozhin – who made the most profound, systematic and scholarly attack on Hasidism. In his book *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* (1824), in which the term Hasid is discreetly omitted, he presents Hasidism as a spiritual movement that ignores a cardinal principle in Judaism: where the essence of a *mitzvah*, or its observance, is jeopardized by an idea, the idea must be set aside. Similarly, if new values – lofty though they may be – threaten to come into conflict with tradition, it is the tradition that must be upheld. Unlike most critics of Hasidism, Hayyim of Volozhin rarely voices an objection to specific Hasidic practices: he takes issue on a theoretical basis with fundamental beliefs of Hasidism that he regarded as dangerous. Thus, he objects to the centrality in Hasidic doctrine of the necessity for "purity of thought," holding that the essence of the Torah and *mitzvot* does not necessarily lie in their being performed with "great *kavvanah* and true *devekut*." Here Hayyim of Volozhin points out the conflict between mysticism and the *halakhah*. He emphasizes the dialectic process by which the performance of a *mitzvah* with excessive *kavvanah* leads to the destruction of the *mitzvah*. The very act of fulfilling the *mitzvah* is the fundamental principle, and not the *kavvanah* accompanying its performance. Here he challenges Hasidism on a matter of basic principle: performing *mitzvot* "for the sake of heaven," he insists, is not a value in itself.

*The Role of
Kavvanah*

Replying to the Hasidic charge that it was common for Talmud scholars to be motivated by considerations of prestige, wealth and fame, Rabbi Hayyim held that Torah study even for

ulterior motives was not to be despised. Moreover, he rejected the Ḥasidic interpretation of the idea of *Torah li-shemah* ("Torah for its own sake") as meaning that the student should have God in mind when he studies the texts. Such an attempt, he argues, would interfere with the intense concentration required for the mastery of difficult halakhic studies. The student should have a few moments of prayer and devout thoughts before his actual studies and then he should immerse himself in the texts. Yet Rabbi Ḥayyim distinguished between the ideological aspect of the controversy and the communal one. Thus, despite his enormous reverence for the Vilna Gaon (rivaling the loyalty of a Ḥasid to his *zaddik*), he did not sign the ban against the Ḥasidim.

According to one student of Ḥasidism, S. A. Horodezky, the rabbis opposed Ḥasidism for the same reason that the Pharisees opposed Jesus. It was not so much the tenets of the new movement that were objectionable, Horodezky maintains, but the supernatural role and exaggerated authority that it assigned to the *zaddik*, who sometimes was made to appear superior to the Torah itself. Horodezky seems to be excessively deprecatory of the role of Ḥasidic theory in arousing opposition, but there can be no doubt that without *zaddikism* Ḥasidism would have found it much easier to gain acceptance. *Horodezky's View*

It should also be kept in mind that in the course of time Ḥasidism divorced itself of some of its more heretical features, thus removing some of the causes of rabbinic opposition. There is much to be said for the view that attributes the healing of the rift between Ḥasidism and Mitnaggedism to the "Judaizing" of Ḥasidism, largely through the work of Ḥabad. The third Lubavicher Rebbe, Rabbi Menahem Mendel, even conceded that there had been a solid basis for the Vilna Gaon's fear that the new system "would gradually lead us, step by step, beyond the boundaries set by tradition and Torah law." The fact that the founder of Ḥabad was himself a victim of the persecution of the *The Judaizing of Ḥasidism*

Mitnaggedim does not necessarily constitute a refutation of this view.

The Attack by the Haskalah

But it was not only the traditionalists that opposed Hasidism: it also was attacked by the leaders of the Haskalah, or Enlightenment, who saw in it nothing but charlatanism, uncouth frenzy and ridiculous superstition. The Maskilim regarded the doctrines and the leaders of Hasidism as an obstacle to the modernization of Jewish life, and they satirized the new movement mercilessly. Joseph Perl (1773-1839), a leading figure in the Galician Haskalah who had been attracted to Hasidism in his youth, even encouraged the Austrian authorities in Galicia, in an incessant stream of denunciatory notes (only recently discovered and published) which he sent to the officials, to take measures against the Hasidim. In the literary sphere he battled against the movement by means of propaganda, parody, and satire. Characteristic is his German book, *On the Character of the Hasidic Sect* (1816), in which he condemns Hasidic practices and beliefs on the ground that they jeopardize the welfare of the state and mislead innocent believers. He denigrates Hasidism by presenting a hostile, often distorted anthology of quotations lifted out of context from Hasidic sources. Perl's principal work, *Megalleh Temirin* ("The Revealer of Secrets"; 1819), is the foremost parody against Hasidism, and it won immense popularity. It imitates the pious style of Hasidic miracle books, so successfully in fact, that some of the faithful are said to have accepted it as one of their own works. Here Perl describes the machinations of the Hasidic leaders in their struggle for influence and material gain. In his satire these leaders resort to bribery, intimidation and blackmail against their rivals, whether rabbis or Maskilim. Its character sketches were so true to life that some Hasidim are said to have avoided appearing in public for fear of being pointed out as the originals.

*Parody and
Satire*

Hasidism was also satirized by Isaac Baer Levinsohn (1788-

1860), one of the founders of the Haskalah in Russia, and Isaac Erter (1791-1851), who together with other young Maskilim had been excommunicated in Lvov in 1816 by Rabbi Jacob Ornstein, the rabbi of the city. Levinsohn, in *Emek Repha'im* ("The Valley of the Dead"), depicts a zaddik in hell (and not in heaven where one might have supposed him to have found his final resting place), where he confesses that, lacking both talmudic and secular learning, the only career open to him had been that of a Hasidic rabbi. Erter's collected satires, *Ha-Zofeh le-Veit Yisrael* ("A Watchman unto the House of Israel"; 1858), portray Hasidism as a combination of hypocrisy, ignorance and superstition.

In sharp contrast to the general hostility manifested by Haskalah writers towards Hasidism was Eliezer Zweifel's (1815-88) *Shalom al Yisrael* ("Peace to Israel"; 1868-73). In his balanced and informed argument, Zweifel undertook an analysis of fundamental Hasidic sayings and teachings, pointing out their significance and underscoring, too, their uniqueness in comparison with Kabbalah. Zweifel's defence of Hasidism relates specifically to the early stages of its development. As a Maskil he of course had reservations about the "popular" elements of Hasidism and about a number of its social aspects: he criticizes the negative features which emerged in the later period of the movement, particularly the cult of the zaddik. The book aroused indignation among the Maskilim, and Jewish censors sympathetic to the Haskalah tried to prevent its publication. *Zweifel's Defence of Hasidism*

With the appearance of the Haskalah as an enemy common to all Orthodoxy, the bitterness and ferocity of the struggle between Hasidism and Mitnaggedim abated, the erstwhile opponents joining hands to stamp out the new threat. However, basic differences between Hasidim and Mitnaggedim remained. With respect to the ranking of various Jewish values, the place of the zaddik in the communal leadership, and the permissibility of certain ecstatic manifestations in the Hasidic way of life. Some- *Uneasy Co-existence*



"The Sasover Rebbe," by Zigmunt Menkes / 1896



Self portrait by Abraham Jacob Shapiro of Dorohobich, who was *admor* of the Grodzisk dynasty from 1922 until his death in 1962.



"Last Prayer," by Samuel Hirschenberg (1865-1908).

times latent sometimes active, these differences never wholly subsided. But owing to the growing conservatism of Hasidism, there emerged an uneasy coexistence between them and the Mitnaggedim. By the middle of the 19th century, Hasidism prevailed in most communities of the Ukraine, Volhynia, central-Poland, Galicia, and in many areas in Hungary and Belorussia – and the pattern of leadership based on the zaddik changed the character of local community leadership. Local leaders and rabbis now became subject to the authority of that zaddik whose followers were the most influential Hasidic group in a given community. In short, in the conflict between the Hasidim and the Mitnaggedim, it was the Hasidim who were eventually victorious.

8. THE ZADDIK WHO TALKED BACK TO GOD

While a common body of doctrine and practice united all zaddikim and distinguished them from other Jewish leaders, there were also pronounced differences between one zaddik and another. The dispute over “practical zaddikism” has been mentioned. Some zaddikim encouraged their followers to believe in their miraculous powers; others – “the holy Jew” of Przysucha was one of these – discouraged such belief. Many zaddikim advocated and practiced loud prayer, punctuated with groans, sighs and exclamations; others taught that quiet prayer was the best, and Menahem Mendel of Warka (1819-68) exemplified this viewpoint so perfectly that he is known as “the silent zaddik.”

Since the attraction of Hasidism depended so much on the charisma of the zaddik, it is not surprising that it was unusually rich in distinctive personalities. There was Simḥah Bunem of Przysucha (1765-1827), who was a pharmacist before he became a zaddik; there was Israel Friedman of Ruzhin (1797-1858), the rebbe of Sadgora, who lived in princely opulence, surrounded by

*A Carriage and
Four*



1



2



3



4



Members of the Ruzhin dynasty: 1. Israel Friedman of Ruzhin (1797-1858) , 2. Dov of Leovo (1827-1876), 3. David Moses of Chortkov (1828-1900), 4. Hayyim David Manzon of Brad (1850-1932), 5. Israel of Chortkov (1854-1934), 6. Israel of Husyatin (1856-1949), 7. Shalom Joseph of Melnitza-Podolskaya (died 1927), 8. Moses of Boyan-Cracow (1881-1943), 9. Abraham Jacob of Sadgora (1884-1961), 10. Mordecai Shelomo of Boyan-New York (1891-1971), 11. Aaron of Chernovtsy (died 1941/2), 12. Mordecai Shalom Joseph of Sadgora-Przemysl (1897-), 13. Isaac Jacob of Husyatin (1900-1968), 14. Jacob Joseph Solomon Halperin of Vaslui (1902-), 15. Isaac of Buhusi (1903-).



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many servants, and who rode in a splendid carriage and four. There was even a woman zaddik, the so-called "Maid of Ludomir" (1805-92), who in order to observe the separation of the sexes, would deliver Sabbath discourses to her Hasidim from an adjoining room, she herself remaining unseen.

There were many more notable zaddikim, but in this brief survey we shall discuss only two of them: Levi Isaac of Berdichev and Menahem Mendel of Kotsk.

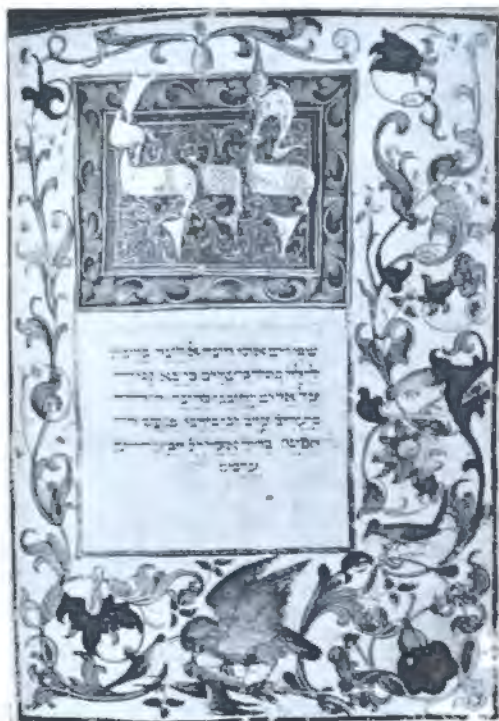
Levi Isaac of Berdichev (c. 1740-1810) was known as Israel's *meliz yosher* ("advocate" or "intercessor"). One of the intimate circle of pupils of the Maggid of Mezhirech, he stressed the element of joy in Hasidism, the principle of *devekut*, and the necessity for fervent prayer to the point of *hitpashetut ha-gashmiyyut* ("divesting oneself of corporeality"). When a man prays fervently "with all his heart and all his soul, his spirit delights because it is elevated from the material world and only the spirit remains." One of the best-loved zaddikim, Levi Isaac occasionally traveled with great acclaim throughout the land. Accompanied by his *minyán*, he introduced the people to the joy of fulfilling the commandments, winning many of them over to Hasidism.

Intercessor for Israel

The "Berdichever" became a popular hero in Jewish poetry and fiction, both in Hebrew and in Yiddish. He shared the distress of his people and worked to improve their living conditions. In singing his prayers he addressed the Creator in Yiddish; popular tradition has preserved some of these prayers, e.g., "The Kaddish of Rabbi Levi Isaac." He stressed the good that is in man and always pleaded the cause of the Jews. "No one," he maintained, "has a right to say anything evil about the Jewish people, but only to intercede for them." Like the Ba'al Shem Tov, he took to task those preachers who seemed to take a perverse delight in ruthlessly exposing Jewish shortcomings. Only he who "admonishes the Jewish people gently, elevates their souls and always extols their righteousness is worthy of being their leader."

Nothing But Good

Many of the tales told of Levi Isaac show his unbounded love for Israel, whose cause he never failed to plead before the Throne of Judgment. Thus when he saw a teamster oiling the wheels of his wagon while wearing his *tallit* and *tefillin*, instead of rebuking



Two pages from the hand-written illuminated manuscript on vellum known as the *siddur* of the rabbi of Ruzhin. It was written in Germany in 1460 and later came into the possession of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin. Both pages are from the Passover service.



him for sacrilege he exclaimed: "O Lord, what a holy people is Thine! Even when they oil the wheels of their wagons they pray unto Thee in *tallit* and *tefillin*!" Another famous story tells of his seeing a Jew eating in public on the Fast of Av. "Surely you must have forgotten that today is the Ninth of Av," Levi Isaac said to him. "No, I have not forgotten," was the reply. "Then perhaps you are unwell?" continued the rabbi. "No, I am in excellent health." The rabbi lifted his eyes towards heaven and exclaimed: "O Lord, behold how thy Jews love the truth. Even when they transgress Thy commandments they do not stoop to utter falsehoods!"

*Unbounded
Love for Israel*

But Levi Isaac also knew how to speak out when the occasion demanded it. Listless prayer was one thing that aroused his ire. Once, after the congregation had finished praying the *Amidah*, he walked over to a group of his Hasidim, shook their hands and greeted them with "Shalom Aleikhem." They were puzzled by this ceremoniousness, usually reserved for guests or for Hasidim who had been out of town. The rabbi soon explained: "The reason for this salutation is that I could read in your faces when you were reciting the *Amidah* that you did not have in mind the meaning of the prayers but were thinking of the grain market in Odessa and the wool market in Lodz. Now that you have returned from so far a distance, it is only right that I extend you a welcome home."

Listless Prayer

When Rabbi Abraham of Kalisk wrote him criticizing the views and conduct of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady, citing in support the testimony against him by certain "men of scholarship, piety and truth," Levi Isaac replied: "I have never seen among them men of scholarship, piety and truth. How can you write about them 'men of truth' when Tzvi Hamar has spoken many falsehoods in my presence; and if he is a scholar, I do not know who is an *am ha-arez*." Like Shneur Zalman, Levi Isaac himself had been an object of persecution by the Mitnaggedim, who had driven him out of Pinsk in 1785.

Nor did his overwhelming love for his people blind Levi Isaac *Jewish Blood* to social evils. When he discovered how hard Jewish women were working, from early morning to late at night, preparing Passover *mazzot*, he protested to his congregation: "We are falsely accused by our enemies of using Christian blood in our Passover food. But we do make our *mazzot* with Jewish blood."



Gravestone of Rabbi Levi Isaac of Berdichev (c. 1740-1810).

Levi Isaac did not hesitate to argue and quarrel with God on *Yankel the* behalf of the Jews, addressing Him in language that from anyone *Tailor* else would have been regarded as blasphemy. On Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur, the solemn Days of Judgment, he was especially apt to use bold words in defense of his people. One Yom Kippur he called a poor and humble tailor as a "witness," urging him to speak up before the congregation. Said the man, "I, Yankel, am a poor tailor who, to tell the truth, have not been too

honest in my work. I have sometimes kept remnants of left-over cloth, and I may have eaten in a non-Jewish home where I was working, without washing my hands. But Thou, O Lord, has taken babies away from their mothers, and mothers from their infants. Let us on this Day of Days be quits. Mayest Thou forgive me as I forgive Thee." Whereupon the Berdichever sighed: "O Yankel, Yankel, why did you let God off so lightly? You might have forced Him to redeem all of Israel."

On another Yom Kippur, Levi Isaac suddenly stopped the services and (in his famous Yiddish introduction to the Kaddish, *A Lawsuit on Behalf of Israel* which has been set to music) challenged God as follows:

Good morning to You, Lord of the Universe!

I, Levi Isaac, son of Sarah, of the city of Berdichev,

Have come to You in a lawsuit on behalf of Your people,
Israel.

Speak, I demand of You.

What have you against your people Israel?

And why do You oppress Your people, Israel?

Wherein have they sinned to be thus tormented?

And I, Levi Isaac, son of Sarah, of the city of Berdichev, say:

... I will not stir from here!

An end there must be to this – it must all stop!

Hallowed and magnified be His great Name.

9. THE REBEL OF KOTSK

Very different in character from Levi Isaac of Berdichev was Menaḥem Mendel of Kotsk (1787-1859), one of the most original Ḥasidic leaders, a rebel and an enigma. Born in Bilgoraj, near Lublin, into a non-Ḥasidic family, he was attracted to the movement in his youth and became a disciple of Jacob Isaac ("the Holy Jew") of Przysucha, and later of Simḥah Bunem of the same city. His teachings, although part of Ḥasidism and in some



"He who learns Torah and is not troubled by it . . . a very scoundrel is better than he." *Heder* in Rzeszow, Poland, before the second World War.

ways continuing its classical lines of thought, are in other respects diametrically opposed to those of the Ba'al Shem Tov.

Hasidism Petrified

Menahem Mendel saw Hasidism as petrified, not unlike the Rabbinism it had originally come to shake out of its lethargy. The "throne" of the *zaddik* was bequeathed from father to son, and Hasidim did not comprehend the nature of the movement, most of them seeing in it little more than the miraculous powers of the *zaddik*, who could help them ease the burdens of this world. The "Kotzker" proposed to change all this. While the Besht emphasized love, joy and compassion for this world, Menahem Mendel demanded constant tension and an unmitigated militancy in the service of God. The furious zeal of the prophets of old came back to life in Kotzk. Other rebbes soothed; the Kotzker scathed. "He who learns the Torah," he said, "and is not

*Zeal of the
Prophets*

troubled by it, who sins and forgives himself, who prays today because he prayed yesterday — a very scoundrel is better than he.”

Like his master, “the Holy Jew,” the Kotzker held that only by utterly despising the concerns of this world could man hope to serve God properly. But he carried this view further, even defining a *Hasid* as “one who discards this world as worthless.” As far as he was concerned, “the entire world is not worth even a single sigh.” And there was nothing in the world for the sake of which it was worth becoming obligated to a fellow man. His kind of *Hasid* was one who, no matter what was involved, asked himself, “And what do I want this for?” Commenting on the verse,



Despite Menaḥem Mendel's unconventional behavior, the impact he made on *Hasidism* survived. The *Hasidim* of Gur are his spiritual heirs: here some are depicted in their Sabbath dress and distinctive fur hats (*spodeks*).

“Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently . . .” he said that the word “only” (*rak*) always implies the exclusion of something; hence the verse should be understood as saying: “Take little heed to thy body and much heed to thy soul.” Possibly with tongue in cheek, Menaḥem Mendel went so far as to say that the Seventh Commandment could be taken to apply to sexual relations with one’s own wife. But the fact is that he encouraged his young disciples to leave their wives and children and study Torah with him for months on end. And he himself avoided conjugal relations with his first wife for 25 years. It was not that there was anything intrinsically evil in marital relations, they simply interfered with dedicating one’s life to the service of God.

Quality Not Quantity

Such teachings could hardly be expected to have a mass appeal. But Menaḥem Mendel was not interested in numbers. Whereas classical Ḥasidism tried to reach all the Jews, the Kotzker was



Reb Israel Alter, the previous rebbe of Gur, who died in 1948, with some of his Ḥasidim. He is joking with the photographer and postures as if to box the camera.

interested only in the select, the few. Thousands of Hasidim flocked to Kotzk from all over Poland, even from the western province of Posen and from Lithuania, in order to see and hear the zaddik. But Menaḥem Mendel saw in this very popularity a sign that he had deteriorated. For his aim had been to lead a hundred or so dedicated young men “who would stand on the rooftops and reach the plane of the prophets.” To guide such a serious-minded group in a life of Torah and faith – that was a goal worth striving for! Of one rebbe he was told about who allegedly had the power to work miracles his dry comment was: “I would like to know if he is able to perform the miracle of making one real Hasid.” It had been his hope, he once said, “to have a small number of disciples, but all of whom would be fire. Instead, many came and turned me into water.” *Fire and Water*

Towards the Hasidim who came to him for his blessing or advice on mundane matters – whether it had to do with making a living or finding a good match for a daughter whose time had come – he could be harsh and contemptuous. To barren women who begged for his prayer he was apt to reply in the words of the Patriarch Jacob when Rachel complained that she had borne no children: “Am I in God’s stead?” When one Hasid came and told him how difficult it was for him to make a living and begged for his intercession, Menaḥem Mendel suggested that he pray for himself. The Hasid replied that he did not know how to pray to the Great and Awesome King, whereupon the rabbi dismissed him by saying, “In that case, you have a much more serious problem than one of livelihood.” In another case, when he was urged to pray on behalf of a pious Hasid who had lost his fortune, he answered: “If he really is a Hasid and a God-fearing man, he lacks nothing.” *Harsh to Suppliants*

One of the Kotzker’s basic teachings was that there was no place for formalism or rote either in prayer or in the performance of *mitzvot*. Each day a man must try to find the truth as if he had not known it before. Prayer must come from the heart;

without the proper *kavvanah* prayer was a sham. This was orthodox Hasidic doctrine, and we have already seen that many Hasidim delayed their prayers beyond the time prescribed in the *Shulhan Arukh*. But the Kotzker was radical even by Hasidic standards, and there were Hasidim in Kotzk who would say the Morning Prayer in the evening and the Afternoon Prayer at midnight. Similarly, Menaḥem Mendel taught that the outward form of a *mitzvah* was less important than its inward meaning. "The prohibition against the making of idols includes within itself the prohibition against making idols out of the *mitzvot*." And while Menaḥem Mendel – like Shneur Zalman of Lyady – emphasized the importance of Torah study, here too he taught that this was not an end in itself. The ultimate purpose of such study was to learn a way of life. To a brilliant student who informed him that he had learned the entire Talmud, Menaḥem Mendel put the question: "And what did the Talmud teach you?"

Sham, pretense, conformity – these were grievous sins in the eyes of the Rabbi of Kotzk. "Thou shalt not steal" certainly did not mean that one should not steal from others – that was obvious. It meant that one should not steal from oneself. To *Be Yourself!* thine own self be true. It was the duty of every man to seek within himself his particular way in the service of God. It was even wrong for a Hasid to imitate the way of his rebbe, for then his own way would be lost – and maybe that way would have brought about the redemption. "If I am I," said the Rabbi of Kotzk, "Because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you. But if I am I because you are you, and you are you because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you."

This accent on individualism was a hallmark of the entire Przysucha-Kotzk school of Hasidism. The following anecdote involving Hanokh of Aleksandrow who, together with Menaḥem Mendel was a disciple of Simḥah Bunim of Przysucha and who later became a disciple of Menaḥem Mendel, speaks for itself:



Today a subculture of Hasidism has developed and become popular among "hippie" youth. Shlomo Carlebach (with the guitar), a leader of the movement, is pictured here singing and playing at a wedding on Mount Zion, Jerusalem, in 1970.

When Hanokh was Simḥah Bunim's disciple it was his duty to act as congregational reader of the Morning Prayer in a house adjoining that of his teacher. Now he was in the habit of praying with vehement gestures and loud cries, quite differently from Rabbi Bunim, who spoke with his characteristic composure even when he conducted the services for the congregation. Once young Hanokh was praying when the rabbi entered the room, and he immediately lowered his voice and stopped gesturing. But

*Simḥah Bunim
and Hanokh*

hardly had he done this, when he reflected and said in his soul: "I am after all not concerned with the rabbi; I am standing before God!" And instantly he resumed his stormy manner of praying. After the service Rabbi Bunim summoned him. "Hanokh," he said to him, "today I took pleasure in your praying."

The way to the truth is a tortuous one, Menaḥem Mendel *The Mysterious Friday Night* taught, and this was no better exemplified than in his own tortured life. A rebellious and fiery spirit, he consumed himself with his own fire. The climax came one Friday night in 1840, a night that is still enveloped in mystery in the annals of Ḥasidism. Hundreds of his Ḥasidim waited for hours that night for him to recite *Kiddush* and begin the Sabbath meal. But he remained closeted in his room. It was midnight when he finally made his appearance. Accounts differ as to what happened thereafter. It seems that when he was handed the *Kiddush* cup he cast it away. Some say that at this point he shouted, "There is no Judgment and there is no Judge!" Others assert that he cried out: "I demand justice. Have we not suffered enough? Why are you afraid, you flatterers and liars? Get out of here and leave me alone." It is also said that he touched the candlestick and thus ostentatiously sinned against the law of the Sabbath.

Some of his disciples left Kotzk at the close of the Sabbath never to return. Others remained faithful to him despite his blasphemous outburst until his death 19 years later. But during that period Menaḥem Mendel locked himself in his room. Food was passed to him through a window, and only on rare occasions did he open the door and make a brief appearance.

Despite the cloud these final years cast over Menaḥem Mendel's life, the spiritual impact of Kotzk and the revolution it wrought in Ḥasidic life and thought continued to be expressed in the fiery approach to Torah and in the marked restlessness of the Ḥasidic mind, particularly in its manifestations among Polish Jews. For although Menaḥem Mendel of Kotzk did not found a

dynasty, his Hasidic approach was to a great extent carried on by the zaddikim of Gur.

10. THE HASIDIC LIFE

At the Court of the Zaddik

Since the mediation of the zaddik played such a basic role in Hasidism, it is easy to understand why it was so imperative for the Hasid to visit the zaddik's court periodically. For the individual Hasid, these visits were both a pilgrimage and an opportunity to be reunited with the brotherhood gathered at the court. The Hasid journeyed to his zaddik's court at least for the High Holidays (usually leaving his family behind), but each week dozens, or even hundreds, of Hasidim would visit the rebbe's court to spend a Sabbath in his shadow. Once there, one of the Hasid's first acts was to call on the *gabbai* (the rebbe's assistant) and request him to write up a *kvitl*, a short note stating the nature of his problem or request. An interview would then be



Many Hasidim object to being photographed.

arranged with the rebbe, who would give the desired blessing or advice. He might suggest a cure for a sickness, approve or disapprove of a projected business venture, express an opinion about a match the suppliant was considering for his son or daughter. Sometimes the rebbe himself would act as matchmaker, suggesting that Reb Yossel's son marry Reb Gershon's daughter. And for the faithful Hasid the rebbe's opinion was law.



A *tish* of the Boyaner Hasidim. The rebbe, Rabbi Fridman, blesses the wine and food before distributing the remaining portion (*shirayim*) among his followers.

"The Rebbe himself never promised miracles," one Hasid relates. "He only wished that something would happen and said, 'God will help.' But he never promised that a miracle would happen to anyone. It was the people, his followers, who believed that he could work miracles." *The Rebbe Never Promised*

In the courts of most rebbes, it was taken for granted that the *kvitl* would be accompanied by a *pidyon*, or monetary contribution, and one commensurate with the suppliant's economic

status. The money went towards the upkeep of the rebbe and his court, and was also used to provide for the needs of the poor in the Hasidic community. During the High Holidays it was not unusual for a prominent rebbe to be visited by several thousand Hasidim. When the Hasidim of Gur made their annual pilgrimage to their leader, the Polish railways put on additional trains to accommodate them. But Hasidim who could not raise the fare

*Holiday
Pilgrimage*



Modern Hasidic *shtibl* during the festival of Sukkot. Prayer is informal and individual, and the room is unadorned and austere.

would go to their rebbe by foot, even if this meant walking for weeks.

All Hasidic leadership is characterized by an extraordinary magnetism. The *zaddik* is believed in, devoutly admired and obediently followed. From the end of the third generation of Hasidism, a dynastic style of leadership often developed, with generation after generation of each dynasty of *zaddikim* following its own *derekh* — its own specific interpretation of the



Wedding of Jonathan Twersky of Tolnoe (born 1906), who stands fourth from the right. To the left of him is Moses Langer of Strettin, his father-in-law, and to the right, his father David Mordecai Twersky (1888-1957).

Hasidic way of life. But always there is the obligation of the *zaddik* to participate in the life of his people, listen to their troubles, and try to help them. The *zaddik* is a mystic who employs his power within the social community and for its sake. In the eyes of his *Hasidim* he is a wonder-healer and miracle-worker, a father confessor, a master psychologist, a moral instructor and a practical adviser all in one.

Surrounded by his followers, the *zaddik* expounds his Hasidic teaching at his table (*"der tish"* in Hasidic parlance), generally during the third meal on the Sabbath (*se'udah shelishit*). Fish,

The Third Meal

which has figured in Jewish mysticism since the time of the Talmud, is always eaten, usually in the form of herring. This meal was not a Hasidic innovation, but the Hasidim vested it with new meaning, transforming it into a celebration of the intimacy between the rebbe and his community. The rebbe is regarded as the ladder between heaven and earth, his mystic contemplation linking him with God, and his concern for the people and his leadership of love tying him to the earth.

Hasidism's insistence on joy (*simḥah*) as the prime factor in the good Jewish life and the essential element of divine worship accounts for its employment of dance and song as expressions of piety and group cohesion, whether in *shetiblekh* (see page 93) in the individual community or when united at the *zaddik's* court and table. Some *zaddikim* ranked music and singing even higher than explicit prayer for the purpose of achieving *devekut*. Since the typical Hasidic *niggun*, or tune, is sung without words (with frequent use of carrier syllables such as *Ah, Ay, Oy, Hey, Bam,*

Song and Dance

Hasid in the traditional dress of the old community of Jerusalem during the festival of Sukkot. The pot in his right hand most probably contains the *etrog*.



Ya-ba-bam, etc.), this predominance of the melodic over the textual aspect may well be directly linked with this doctrine. Hasidic dance assumed the form of the circle, symbolic of the Hasidic philosophy that “every one is equal, each one being a link in the chain, the circle having no front or rear, no beginning or ending.”

Another Hasidic custom that contributes to the closeness of the Hasidic group – though it is likely to repel the outsider – is that of rushing to the rebbe’s table to obtain a morsel of the remnants (*shirayim*) of the food he has touched. This may be at the *se’udah shelishit* or at some festive occasion. A recent writer, not unsympathetic, gives the following description of the



Three Hasidim examine an *etrog* (citron) carefully, to ensure that it is whole and perfect, and meets the requirements of this *mitzvah* of the Sukkot festival.

custom: "Then the rebbe took a morsel of fish from the plate, ate it, and pushed the plate aside. Immediately, there was bedlam. The Hasidim, who a moment before had been frozen against the wall, sprang toward the plate and struggled over it like a pack of famished animals." The Hasid, however, has no doubt that if he eats of food that the zaddik has blessed he is ensured of both earthly and eternal bliss.

From its beginnings Hasidism developed its own prayer rite. *Prayer Rite* The Hasidic rite, though called *Nusah Sepharad*, is actually not identical with the Sephardi rite; it contains elements of the Polish Ashkenazi rite, changes made by Rabbi Isaac Luria ("Ha-Ari") and the Sephardi rite of the Land of Israel. The result is a patchwork and was a source of considerable confusion; there are even many differences between the various Hasidic prayer books. The Hasidim downgraded the formality of the synagogue service, stressing in its stead the fervor and excitement that should accompany prayer: their service involves singing, shaking, clapping and body movements.

The Hasidic Shtibl

In the first generation of Hasidism, while it was still a minority group in most communities and under bitter attack, the Hasidim opened small prayer houses of their own, called *shtiblekh* (singular *shtibl*, "small room"), a name used to this day. In the second generation of Hasidism, Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye gave a positive reason for praying separately: to improve the nature of the worship. For Jacob Joseph found that in the typical synagogue prayers were rushed through, mechanically, without *kavvanah*; the *hazzan* was overly concerned with impressing the congregation, the rich were looking for honor, and the people showed no respect for the house of worship. "He who wants to be holy should set himself apart to pray in a *minyan* of his own, since it is not possible to pray with a congregation which performs the *mitzvot* by rote." The *shtiblekh* were devoid of

elaborate furnishings and decorations; in fact they were more of the *bet ha-midrash* type, being places for meetings and study as well as for prayer. Communal meals, particularly the *se'udah shelishit* were held there. The Hasidic synagogue did away with salaried officiants; members of the congregation led the prayers themselves and generally the whole atmosphere was very informal. By and large, pews were replaced by tables and benches, and the internal appearance was much more austere than that of the regular synagogue.

Unfortunately, practice did not always rise to the heights of *Ideal and Principle*, and somewhere along the line the high purpose that *Practice* had given rise to the *shitibl* was forgotten and it was almost impossible to find in many of them any trace of the awe that one associates with prayer. Perhaps the Hasidim were simply too much at home with God. (Herbert Weiner has called attention to the gap between "Buber and Belz" – between Hasidism's lofty teachings that so enchanted the philosopher of "I and Thou" and the reality of Hasidism in the flesh.)

The memory of past *zaddikim* and the image of living ones are shaped and kept alive through the Hasidic tale (*ma'aseh*), which is recounted as an act of homage to the living link between the Hasid and God. These tales embody the sayings of the Ba'al Shem Tov and other Hasidic leaders, especially Levi Isaac of Berdichev, Nahman of Bratslav and Menahem Mendel of Kotzk. The ecstatic prayer of the *zaddik* – for the most part when reciting the Song of Songs or the *Lekhu Nerannenah* prayer on Sabbath eve – figures frequently in Hasidic tales.

One of the areas in which Hasidism strenuously opposed *Conservative* innovation was that of dress. In the Middle Ages, the imitation of *Dress* gentile garb had been regarded as *hukkat ha-goi* ("customs of the gentiles") and the Jewish minority's retention of its distinctive habits of dress undoubtedly contributed to its survival. It was an easy step from that to turning the Jewish garb worn in Eastern Europe into an emblem of allegiance to traditional Judaism, and

Example 2

$\text{♩} = 36-40$

Vald vald vi groys bis - te, roy3 roy3 vi vayt bis - te.

Volt der vald nisht a joy groys ge - ven. volt di

roy3 nisht a joy vayt ge - ven. Gu-les, gu-les vi

groys bis - te shkhi - ne shkhi - ne vi vayt bis - te.

Volt der gu-les nisht a joy groys ge - ven. volt di

shkhi - ne nisht a - joy vayt ge - ven

Some zaddikim ranked music and singing even higher than explicit prayer for achieving *derekevut*. This Hasidic Yiddish song, *Vald Vald*, is attributed to Rabbi Isaac of Kalov who probably took the melody from a shepherd's love song.

here the Hasidim were even more conservative than the Mitnaggedim.

Hasidim generally grow their beards long and cultivate earlocks (*pe'ot*; Yiddish, *peyis*). They wear a wide-brimmed black

hat, which on the Sabbath may be replaced by the fur-trimmed *shtreimel*. Ties are not customary. Shoes are black, stockings usually white. During prayer a black silk girdle (*gartel*) will be tied around the waist – to separate the animal part of man's body from the upper, distinctly human part. One American Hasid gives the following explanation for the earlocks, the beard, the distinctive dress: "After all, if we go dressed like this, there are certain places we can't go to, and things we can't do. It's like a safety belt in the car. It helps prevent accidents."

Women and Hasidism

A Hasid – even today – avoids looking at women. If he must talk to a woman he will face sideways. On no account will he shake hands with a woman, however. But sometimes even Hasidism makes concessions to the demands of modern life. One Hasid in Jerusalem who works in a government office has adopted the following compromise: he speaks to the women in the office during work but has explained to them that he cannot talk to them should they happen to meet on the street. Some occupations are avoided altogether as being incompatible with the Hasidic way of life. Thus a dentist who became a Hasid gave up his profession because it required him "to look into women's mouths."

Enthusiasts of Hasidism, such as S. A. Horodezky, assert that the movement gave the woman an honored position she had never enjoyed before, even "complete equality" in religious life. She too went to visit the *zaddik*, even by herself, handed in her *kvittel*, and unburdened herself of her spiritual and material problems. Sometimes she would drag her husband along with her to the *zaddik*. If there was a falling out between husband and wife, all they had to do was go to the *zaddik* and one word from him was enough to restore harmony. Horodezky does not stop here. The woman Hasid, he says, unlike her busy husband, always found time to read the writings of the *zaddikim* and to meditate over

them, to increase her knowledge, and thus also to influence her husband.

This is obviously an idealized picture of the Hasidic woman. In *Shivhei ha-Besht* a Hasid would go to the Ba'al Shem Tov for an amulet and give him money even when his wife gave birth to a girl. In the Hasidic *shtibl* the women sit in a thickly screened balcony or even in a separate room. The young disciples of Menahem Mendel of Kotzk were not the only Hasidim who left their wives for long periods to study with their *zaddik*, despite the wife's tears and her parents' pleading. It is true that Adel, the Besht's daughter, figures in many Hasidic legends and was believed to be endowed with Divine Inspiration. And that there was once a woman *zaddik*, the Maid of Ludomir. But two swallows do not make a summer, and even Rabbinism had its Beruryah, the wife of Rabbi Meir, whose views on halakhic matters were seriously reckoned with by her second-century contemporaries. It is difficult not to accept the verdict that "the Hasidic congregation was a man's world; in it, there was no place for women."

11. SATMAR, LUBAVICH – AND IN BETWEEN

Although the Holocaust struck the Hasidic community more severely than any other part of Jewry, many of the surviving Hasidic rebbes succeeded in re-establishing their "courts" in Israel or the United States. A brief description of four of the leading dynasties today – Belz, Gur, Satmar, and Lubavich – will give some notion of the tremendous variety the Hasidic movement has managed to encompass within it.

Belz – Normative Hasidism

Belzer Hasidim may be taken as the "typical" or "classical" type, and practically all we have said about the Hasidic way of life



Jerusalemites in the Mea Shearim quarter of Jerusalem. Both Hasidim and Mitnaggedim live here but although seven or eight generations have passed since the initial controversy between the two groups, they still maintain separate schools, yeshivot and prayer houses. Note the banner across the street exhorting women to dress modestly.

applies to them without qualification. The Morning Prayer at Belz was delayed until noon, and the conclusion of the Sabbath celebrated around midnight. The founder of the dynasty was Shalom Roke'ah (1799-1855), of whose miracle-working many legends are told. Belz – a small town 40 miles north of Lvov – soon became the center of Galician Hasidism. Shalom's son Joshua (1825-94) had tens of thousands of followers, in Galicia, Poland and Hungary. Hundreds of them assembled at the rebbe's court each week, and on Rosh Ha-Shanah some 5,000 Hasidim would throng to Belz. Joshua was one of the leading opponents of the Haskalah and the Belz zaddikim in general adopted an extreme stand, resisting every new idea that emanated from non-Orthodox circles. Jewish traditional dress, for example, was a dogma among the Belzer Hasidim, and the adoption of the styles of modern Europe by the Sadeger-Rizhin court evoked Belz's deep antagonism. Joshua's successor, Issachar Dov (1845-1927), a contemporary of Theodor Herzl, strongly opposed Zionism in any form, but his son and successor, Aaron (1880-1957) found refuge in Palestine in 1944 after losing many members of his family in the Holocaust. Here he revised Belz's traditional anti-Zionism and directed his followers to support Agudat Israel. He was succeeded by his nephew, Issachar Dov (1948-), whose marriage in Benei Berak in 1965 (to the granddaughter of the Vishnitzer Rebbe) drew 30,000 guests from all over the world.

Gur in Poland

In Poland, the dynasty of Gur (Yiddish: Ger; a town about 5 miles from Warsaw) was as celebrated as was that of Belz in Galicia. And, like Belz, its center moved to the Land of Israel as a result of the Holocaust, and most Gerer Hasidim now live in Israel. Gur Hasidism is based primarily on the Hasidic trend developed by "the Holy Jew" of Przysucha and Menahem Mendel of Kotzk, and it was the Jew of a scholarly bent that was attracted to its combination of rabbinic learning and Hasidic

warmth and simplicity. The founder of the dynasty was Isaac Meir Alter (1789-1866) who, after the death of Menaḥem Mendel in 1859, was acknowledged by the majority of the Kotzk Ḥasidim as their rebbe. His novellae on Talmud tractates and the *Shulḥan Arukh*, entitled *Hiddushei ha-Rim* (1875) became basic



Issachar Dov (left), the present Belzer rebbe, with his father-in-law (center) Hayyim Meir Hager of Vizhnitz, at the Western Wall.

texts for study in the yeshivot. Unlike the Przysucha-Kotzk *zaddikim*, “the Rim” did not withdraw from contact with the masses, but like them he evinced vehement antagonism to miracle working. “If a Ḥasid’s motive [for making a pilgrimage] is livelihood, healing or miracle working,” he announced shortly after being recognized as a *zaddik*, “he should not come to Gur.” None of the Gur *zaddikim* accepted gifts from their followers,

Gifts Rejected



The present rebbe of Gur, Israel Alter, in Jerusalem. The Gur dynasty originated in Poland in the 1850s, and in 1940 moved to Jerusalem where it is now centered.

even in the form of *pidyon*. It was due to the influence of the third rebbe of Gur, Judah Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1905) that Hasidism in Poland dissociated itself from Zionism. But his son, Abraham Mordecai Alter (1866-1948), the last of the dynasty in Poland, influenced thousands of his followers to settle in the Land of Israel. He was one of the founders of Agudat Israel, and under his leadership Gur Hasidism reached the height of its



Joel Teitelbaum of Satmar, born 1887, a vigorous opponent of Zionism and of the State of Israel.

influence. He restored the recitation of morning prayer to the regular time and introduced a break during the Sabbath service for public study. He escaped from Gur to Warsaw at the outbreak of World War II, and reached Palestine in 1940. His son, Israel Alter (1892-) succeeded him as rebbe of Gur upon his death in 1948, at the height of the siege of Jerusalem.

Satmar in New York

The largest group of Hasidim in New York is the Satmarer, the followers of Joel(ish) Teitelbaum of Satmar (1888-). He is the fifth in a dynasty founded by Moses ben Zevi of Ujhely (1759-1841), who was one of the first to spread Hasidism in the northern and central districts of Hungary. Because of its intolerant attitude toward other Hasidic groups, Satmar has been described as a ghetto within Hasidism. In their stronghold in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, the Satmarer Hasidim today dress much the same as their forbears in Hungary at the turn of

*A Ghetto within
Hasidism*

the century. The men's earlocks are usually worn so that they are clearly visible, and the married women clip their hair very close to the scalp. Their goal is to maintain their social and intellectual isolation, and they make every effort to protect their children from contamination by the surrounding culture. The Satmarer Rebbe is notorious for his vehement stand and aggressive propaganda against Zionism and the State of Israel, which he maintains have delayed the coming of the Messiah and resulted in all the troubles affecting the Jewish people in the 20th century, including the Holocaust. He holds that a secular-democratic state is inconsistent with the *halakhah*, and that a Jew who lives in the Land of Israel and does not observe the *mitzvot* defiles the land. He has forbidden his followers in Israel to vote in Knesset elections, to visit the Western Wall or to make use of the



Joel Teitelbaum of Satmar while visiting Israel. He is being protected from the crowds by the Israeli police.

country's courts or legal system. For a period, the ultra-Orthodox Natorei Karta community in Jerusalem recognized Joel Teitelbaum as its rabbi. When he visited Israel in 1959 he travelled in a Turkish boat to Haifa and thence to Jerusalem in a special train chartered by Natorei Karta, for which they printed special tickets without the hated Israel insignia. But Satmar's opposition to Israel is not always expressed so passively. The opening of a mixed swimming pool (i.e., where men and women would swim at the same time) in Jerusalem in 1958 led the Satmar group to stage a picketline demonstration at the White House against the "Unheard Brutality of Israel Zionist Police." And Satmarer Hasidim so harassed Jewish leaders in Williamsburg with whom they do not see eye to eye (e.g., telephoning them all through the night, insulting their wives on the street) that at least one of them, an Orthodox rabbi active in the Mizrahi, was forced to move from the neighborhood. It is not easy to find here any trace of the doctrine of love taught by the Ba'al Shem Tov.

Lubavich – The Largest Hasidic Group

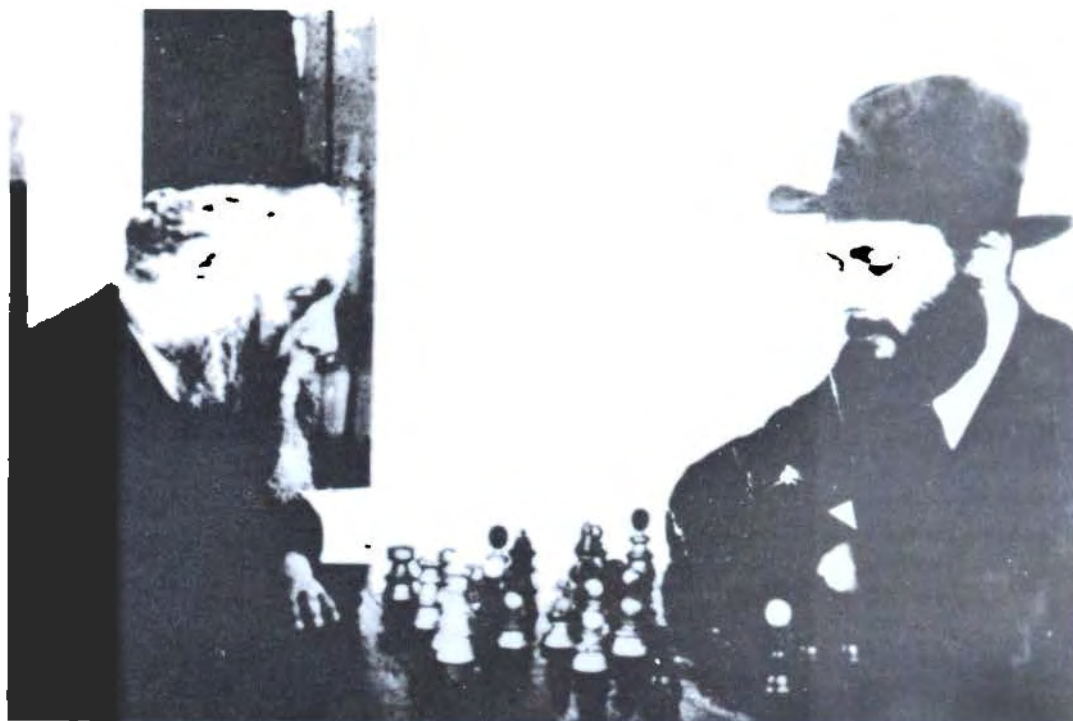
At the other end of the Hasidic spectrum in their attitude towards both the State of Israel and Jews from other camps are the Lubavicher-Habad Hasidim whose estimated 250,000 adherents make them the largest Hasidic group in the world. We have already described the founding of Habad by Shneur Zalman of Lyady (see page 56). "Lubavich" comes from the Belorussian townlet of that name which became the center of Habad under the leadership of Shneur Zalman's son, Dov Baer (1773-1827). Today Habad is probably the best organized and most dedicated Jewish religious organization in the world. Habad is represented on all continents; the hub of its empire is at 770 Eastern Parkway, in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York, and there is a large branch in Israel centered at Kefar Habad, near Lydda. The present rebbe, the seventh in the dynasty, is

Menahem Mendel Schneersohn. Born in the Russian town Niloaev in 1902, he settled in the United States in 1941, after having studied mathematics and engineering at the Sorbonne. A son-in-law of the sixth Habad Rebbe, he was called upon to assume the leadership in 1950, at the age of 48. Under his direction the influence of Lubavich spread far beyond the Hasidic community and penetrated the mainstream of Jewish life in many parts of the world. In theory, the Habad Hasid is too sophisticated to expect miracles from his zaddik; he looks to him only for spiritual guidance. Nevertheless, the present Rebbe is said to have cured a man of cancer by placing his hand on the man's side and saying "*Si'z gornisht*" ("It's nothing"). A more recent miracle is recounted by the chairman of the Kefar Habad

*Studied at the
Sorbonne*

Menahem Mendel Schneersohn, the present Lubavicher rebbe, shown at the age of three.





The late Lubavicher rebbe, Joseph Isaac Schneersohn (1880-1950; left) playing chess with his son-in-law, the present rebbe, Menaḥem Mendel Schneersohn (born 1902).

village council, who spent the High Holidays of 1973 with the Lubavicher Rebbe in Brooklyn. Before his return to Israel the Rebbe gave him a bottle of brandy to take to Zafriyyah, a village near Kefar Habad. When he got there he learned that one of the boys of the village had been seriously wounded in the Yom Kippur War and was lying unconscious in a hospital. It occurred to him that the Rebbe may have had this boy in mind. He went to the hospital, and there he learned that the soldier's watch had stopped when he was hit by a missile, so that the exact time of the incident was known. This turned out to be the very moment that the Rebbe had handed him the bottle of brandy. He told the

story to the doctor, who agreed to give the boy a few drops from the bottle. No sooner had he done so than the boy opened his eyes, fully conscious.

The uniqueness of Habad lies in the fact that it tries to reach other Jews and, if not to make "Habadniks" out of them, at least to draw them a little closer to Orthodoxy. Indeed, in one of its publications, it describes itself as "a mission to Jews by Jews." (In Chaim Potok's recent novel, *My Name is Asher Lev*, the name "Ladover" is a thin disguise for Lubavich.) Habad representatives make regular visits to college campuses and military camps, they conduct a once-a-month kindergarten for a small number of Jewish children who live miles away from the nearest synagogue or Talmud Torah school, and they will even send a *mohel* to circumcise a child on a remote Caribbean island. Habad has developed a widespread network of schools, and it has prepared textbooks for Jewish children who are released from public school one afternoon a week in order to receive religious instruction. In Jerusalem, the tourist visiting the Western Wall is likely to be approached by a Habad Hasid with a pair of *tefillin* in his hand, suggesting that he put them on then and there.

*A Mission to
Jews by Jews*

12. CONTINUITY OR REVOLT ?

Hasidism's Place in Jewish History

Still an unsettled question is the place to be assigned to Hasidism in the mosaic of Jewish history.

Martin Buber (1878-1965) regarded the Hasidic teaching as the most powerful and unique phenomenon produced by the Diaspora. Deeply stirred by the religious message of Hasidism he undertook to convey that message to the world. From his existentialist teachings, Buber utilized the principle of dialogue as a criterion for understanding the essence of Hasidism, which he saw as giving support to the direct encounter, active and creative,

*Buber's
Interpretation*

between man and the world surrounding him. According to Buber, the dialogue of encounter reveals the reality of God: the cosmos is potentially holy, the encounter with man makes it actually holy. The origin of this fundamental concept, which he called pan-sacramentalism, Buber sought to locate in the Hasidic doctrine of the worship of God through the corporeal and worldly dimensions of man's being. The revival of Judaism that found expression in Hasidism was seen by Buber as a fresh and living religious phenomenon, but also as a process of social and communal consolidation of novel educational importance.

He believed that the *zaddikim* gave expression to this new educational and religious meaning, for every *zaddik* represented a special experience acquired as a result of the encounter through dialogue. Buber emphasized the concrete significance of Hasidism, placing little value on its abstract ideas. He understood



The *sheva berakhot* (wedding blessings) being recited by three rebbes.



The third president of the State of Israel, Zalman Shazar, had strong Lubavicher sympathies. He is seen here in Kefar Habad celebrating the 19th of Kislev, the anniversary of the release of the first Lubavicher rebbe from prison in Czarist Russia.

the Hasidic imperative, "Know Him in all thy ways," as transcending the bounds of the *mitzvot*, as religious experience over and above the *halakhah*.

This view was scathingly attacked by the Zionist Maskil Samuel Joseph ("Shay") Ish-Horowitz (1862-1922), who in *Ha-Hasidut ve-ha-Haskalah* (1909) depicted Hasidism as a wild, undisciplined movement and the Ba'al Shem Tov as a charlatan. As Horowitz saw it, Hasidism contributed no new truths or ways of looking at the world: it simply appropriated to itself the vocabulary of the Kabbalah without fully understanding its implications, and colored it with quasi-philosophical notions "belonging to the household mentality and chronic psychology of the ghetto." The neo-Hasidism of Buber attempted to discover in Hasidism ethical values and a positive popular force, particu-

larly in the Hasidic "joy", which it interpreted as protest against the dejection produced by the conditions of *Galut*; but for Horowitz the Shabbatean movement was to be preferred to Hasidism, since it took an upright stand, advocating a breaking free of the bonds of the *Galut* and the ghetto. Horowitz dismissed as arrant nonsense the claims that Hasidism was a movement of revival and revolt; far from rebelling against the rabinate, Hasidism retained the *mitzvot* in all their minutiae. He contended that the neo-Hasidim were deceiving themselves by interpreting the values of Hasidism in secular terms, which he regarded as a perversion of history in the spirit of a new humanism. He believed that Hasidism was continuity and not revolt, and that the neo-Hasidim did violence to its true nature by depicting it as a revolutionary movement in Jewish history.

That Hasidism could lend itself to such antithetical interpretations derives from the fact that it represented, in Gershom

The Ponovezher rav, Joseph Kahaneman (died 1969) and the Chryzanover rebbe, David Moses (right). Two hundred years ago the conflict between Mitnaggedim and Hasidim was so bitter that it would have been unthinkable for two rabbis from opposing groups to sit together amicably. Although differences remain in the prayers and customs of Hasidim and Mitnaggedim, Hasidim are now fully accepted and most of the acrimony has gone from the dispute.





Jonathan Twersky of Rotmistrivka (born 1903) on the left, with his son, Velvele Twersky, at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

Scholem's phrase, "a curious mixture of conservatism and innovation." Its paradoxical attitude towards tradition is nicely illustrated in the reply one *zaddik* gave when he was asked why he did not follow his teacher's example by living as he did. "On the contrary," he said, "I do follow his example, for I have departed from his way just as he departed from that of his teacher."

Despite the charge of its opponents that it set the *zaddik* above the *Shulhan Arukh*, Hasidism in fact never questioned the authority of the Jewish law. Despite the leeway it allowed itself in departing from the *halakhah* in the matter of the time of prayer, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Hasidism was essentially a conservative movement. Buber himself admitted this

*Essentially
Conservative*



Reb Jekuthiel Judah Halberstam of Klausenburg (second from right) with Levi Eshkol (1895-1969), third prime minister of Israel.

when he said that “the conserving force secretly remained superior to the moving and renewing one and finally conquered it within Hasidism itself.”

One can almost hear Buber sigh as he penned those words. *A Struggle Within* But the statement also highlights the fact that Hasidism was not static, that a struggle took place within it to determine the ultimate nature of the movement. Abraham Joshua Heschel has said that Hasidism’s major revolution was its opposition to what was generally accepted in Judaism – namely, that study is an answer to all problems. And there is no doubt that to a large extent the heresy the early Mitnaggedim detected in Hasidism stemmed from the latter’s insistence that the study of the Talmud was not the be-all-and-end-all of Judaism.

But quite early in the history of Hasidism, its anti-intellectualism ceased to be an article of faith. Although "neo-Hasidism" today is applied to Buber's version, historically it might be more accurate to employ the term to Hasidism beginning with Shneur Zalman's founding of Habad. For with Habad (which was more than just another "branch" of Hasidism) Hasidism may be said to have ceased to be exaltation instead of study and to have become exaltation plus study – or even study plus exaltation.

The Message of Hasidism

So much for the place of Hasidism in Jewish history. What of its message? First, the insistence on the hallowing of all life, the consecration of the everyday. Traditional Judaism had always taught that life could not be compartmentalized, that the Jew's

*The Hallowing
of All Life*



Munkace rebbe, Hayyim Eleazar (1871-1937) in the center, with four of his Hasidim, strolling in the streets of the spa, Karlsbad. Note the bottles of the mineral water.

religious duties transcended the synagogue and the house of study. In one form or another Jewish teachers down the ages had repeated the rebuke of the prophet Amos: "Yea, though ye offer me burnt-offerings and your meal-offerings, I will not accept them . . . Take thou away from Me the noise of thy songs; and let Me not hear the melody of thy psalteries. But let justice well up as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream." But Hasidism went beyond this when it taught that service of God embraces every aspect of daily life, that there is no place where God does not enter, that there is no human occupation but is an act of worship. "God dwells wherever man lets him in." The doctrine that the most profane action can be done in holiness was not traditional Judaism, and it aroused the particular ire of the Mitnaggedim, who feared that it would lead to the profanation of the holy.

Traditional Judaism spoke of "the burden of the *mitzvot*," *Away with Gloom*
 The obligations of Judaism, in other words, were something that God imposed on the Jew and which the Jew had to fulfill perforce, even though life might be easier without them. But Hasidism emphasized the joy of being a Jew. God wants a happy world, and the important thing is to "serve the Lord thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart." Do not live under the weight of sin and guilt. Where there is song and dance, gloom disappears. Do not hesitate to take delight in the world, do not rebel against your desires, but bind these to God.

Hasidism, finally lays stress on what God demands of man, of the individual. What can you do as an individual to make earth into heaven? You are unlike any other individual on the face of the earth, and while you cannot change everything you do have responsibility for the piece of world entrusted to you. Rabbi Zusya said just before his death: "In the world to come they will not ask me, 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me, 'Why were you not Zusya?' "



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"Debate and Study" by Tully Filmus. Tully Filmus is known for his warm realistic sketches of Hasidim.

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